NORA ADAMYAN

FOUR LIVES

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SHORT STORIES

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LIFE'S BEGINNING

Ruben was the first to congratulate Tamara. He looked into her eyes and said in a low voice, trying to master his emotion:

"Well, dearest, that's over. Now—push on!"

How like Ruben that was! Only one thought in his mind even at a moment like this: push on! "It's hard keeping up with you. I must for ever be reaching out to overstep myself It's like walking always on tiptoe," Tamara had complained in the first years after they were married. Later she had understood: there was no living with him in any other way; or without him.

"Now, now, this won't do, this won't do!" said Academician Megrashvili, Tamara's official opponent, in his rumbling bass. "Op-

ponents must be respected and indulged after the degree has been won, not only before. Your husband can congratulate you afterwards. My train leaves in two hours."

Tamara, radiant, held out both hands to him.

Flowers appeared—lilacs, white and deep violet, sheaves of blue iris. Friends, acquaintances, students crowded around Tamara.

The director of the Institute, a scientist of world repute, but quite a young man still, said gravely:

"It was splendid. Talented." He frowned, regretting the praise that had escaped him. "Perhaps I shouldn't have said that. But I have faith in you. It won't turn your head."

A friend came up and whispered:

"You were wonderful. A bit nervous just at first, but afterwards—it was all so cogent, so impressive!"

"Was it truly?" Tamara asked—and again: "Really, truly?"

She would have liked to live it all over again—all that she had experienced today, in this spacious auditorium that she had entered as a rank-and-file physicist and was now to leave as a Candidate of Sciences. She looked

about her. She wanted this room and all that had taken place there to be imprinted in her memory for ever. But it was changing with every minute. The charts, photographs and diagrams that only an hour ago had been so vitally important were now heaped carelessly together. The members of the Academic Board had left their seats, and no longer seemed so frigid, so forbidding.

Tamara went over to her old teacher of mathematics. It was he who had presided all those years ago over her first examination. Her little store of knowledge—all that she had carefully studied, pored over, memorized had that day suddenly abandoned her, leaving nothing but jumbled confusion. She had sat there silently, her mind a blank, with only a horrified sense that her margin of time was running out.

"I know the answers," she had said, despairingly. "I'm nervous, that's all."

Shaking his head indifferently the old man had turned his eyes to the blackboard. His next question was unconnected with the subject in hand.

"What shape is the earth?" he had asked.

"Round!" Tamara had at once supplied.

"Not nervous, eh?" His sharp little eyes had fixed themselves triumphantly on her face. "Not nervous this time, because you know it so well."

It was a lesson Tamara was never to forget.

There he sat, a bulky figure, leaning heavily on a stick.

"Well done!" he said, asthmatically. "It was a pleasure to hear you. Interesting—very."

"He's quite ill, yet he's come," Tamara thought with a pang. "Thank you," she said softly.

As she spoke to him she realized more clearly than ever before that nearly every one of these people, who had come to hear her present her thesis, had helped her in some way, in her work and in her life. And she wanted to tell them so, loudly, that all might hear!

Gradually the auditorium emptied. Besides Tamara's and Ruben's friends only one old man remained—a lean little man who held himself somewhat apart from the others. Now and again he would make an ineffectual effort to push through to Tamara, but then, as though thinking better of it, retreated again to the background.

"Do you know who that is?" Ruben asked quietly, seeing that the old man had no intention of leaving.

"It can't be!" Tamara thought, taking in the humped nose and sharp features.

"It can't be!" she repeated loudly, hurrying over to the old man's side. "Uncle Armenak!"

A shy smile came and went on the old man's thin face. Then his lips began to tremble and pressing a heavy brief-case to his breast he began fumbling for something in his pockets.

Impulsively Tamara kissed her uncle on his badly-shaven cheek. She caught an odour of stale tobacco smoke, moth balls and something else that was infinitely familiar and infinitely distant.

"Ruben!" Tamara called. "Come and meet my uncle."

"Yes, indeed. Her own mother's brother.... Blood ties," Uncle Armenak was mumbling. He had dried his eyes with a yellowish handkerchief and timidly pressed Ruben's hand.

"I'm glad to meet you," Ruben said. "Did you come to town specially for Tamara's thesis?"

Uncle Armenak was shocked.

"Oh, no, no! I'm here on business. The office sent me."

"A happy coincidence. You must come over to the house with us. That goes for all of you, comrades! And don't any of you lose yourselves on the way!"

Tamara's mother-in-law, Grannie Arus, loved a feast, but she was convinced that autumn was the only time for holiday-making.

"It's only in autumn you can set a handsome table," she would say. "Why, the grapes alone! And the peaches and pears. And the assorted *dolma* is a dream! And what can you do in spring? Not even a good bit of mutton to be had!"

"Now, Mother, no fussing!" Ruben had said. "Our friends will be coming to congratulate Tamara and to have a good time. Do you think your *dolma* will make any difference? Don't bother your head about it."

But there are flowers in abundance in spring, and all the rooms were full of them—flowers stood in vases, jars, and even in platters.

Grannie Arus and Marjik had planned to meet Tamara ceremonially in the hall, with huge bouquets. But Marjik most unceremoni-

ally shrieked, "Mummy!" and threw her arms around Tamara's neck, dropping her flowers to the floor.

Tamara had an odd feeling—a mingling of blissful emptiness with the urge to be doing something. She kept wandering to the kitchen and aimlessly opening and shutting cupboard doors, as though there were something she must do to help. But there was nothing at all to do. Grannie Arus had everything ready and waiting. For all her grumbling, she had prepared a really sumptuous feast.

Uncle Armenak, at first, kept in the background, looking on with interest but speaking to no one. Then, timidly, he beckoned to Tamara.

"That man—I know him," he whispered in her ear, rolling his eyes to indicate Megrashvili, whom Ruben had persuaded that he would not miss his train if he dropped in for a glass of wine. "He's a very important man in our parts. A deputy. I voted for him, mind you tell him that. He's here on a business trip, too, is he?"

"Academician Megrashvili? Why, he's my official opponent. He came to hear me present my thesis."

"A man like that, coming on your account?" Uncle Armenak shook his head doubtfully. "Well, I suppose, he might. . . ."

Then, with mincing steps, he made a round of Tamara's rooms, looking into every nook and corner. He seemed satisfied with what he found.

"All conveniences," he said. "But the furniture's not what it should be. Riga suites are in fashion now. The Kalustyanovs—you remember them? Their daughter's got herself a dining-room suite, very smart. Of course, you can get them in one of those commissionary shops, only that's more expensive."

"Yes, of course," Tamara replied absently. "What had changed Uncle Armenak so, made him so talkative?" she was thinking. Then she remembered—why, of course! Grandmother was gone.

"We got your money regularly," Uncle Armenak went on. "But you know your grandmother. She never spoke about you. She thought of you often, but—never a word. She had an easy death. Slipped off in her sleep. And I gave her a good burial, don't you fear for that. The coffin alone cost seven hundred

rubles. Of course, the office helped. They value me, you know."

The company in the dining-room were calling loudly for Tamara. They drank her health, and her further achievements. And Tamara, too, drank a full glass when a toast was raised for Soviet science.

Uncle Armenak was not satisfied with the toasts. Too little had been said in praise of Tamara.

They had seated the old man at the head of the table, in the place of honour: After all, he was Tamara's only relative. Old folk are respected in Armenia and relatives honoured. They drank his health, and he was touched and proud, and decided to offer a toast himself.

"It makes me very happy," he said, lifting his thin-stemmed glass, filled with sparkling, golden wine, "it makes me very happy that your friend and my niece, Tamara Zurabyan, holds high the honour of our family."

"Yes, yes," Tamara was thinking, "the same old words, how familiar it all is!"

"Of course, you people here may not know it, but I'm sure Tamara will confirm to you that in our town, and it's not so very small a town"—Uncle Armenak gave a self-

satisfied chuckle, "the Zurabyans are known to all as honest and worthy people. I may not be a man of science, but when my superior, the esteemed Comrade Barsaladze, sends for me and tells me, 'You're the only man I can depend on, Armenak Zurabyan,' surely that means something! And if my mother, who brought up Tamara—Tamara who has now become a scientist—if my mother were alive, she would be proud to know that Tamara Zurabyan has proved her worth a hundred per cent. I raise this glass to my niece, to her esteemed husband, may they and their dear ones thrive and prosper, and to all these honoured guests who sit at this table today!"

The nights are short in spring. The sky had turned from black to a transparent blue before the last of the guests went home. Grannie Arus, indefatigable as always, moved noiselessly about the rooms in her soft slippers, clearing away the dishes. Ruben, a little overcome with all the toasts, was sound asleep. Uncle Armenak had gone to bed long since, on the big sofa, and was snoring away contentedly. His brief-case was tucked carefully under his pillow.

"Rest, child," Grannie Arus said to Tamara. "See! It's daylight already."

But excitement banishes sleep, and Tamara lay in bed, open-eyed. For the first time in many years her past life rose before her, brought vividly to memory by the unexpected appearance of Uncle Armenak.

Every person experiences things in his life that he prefers to forget. And our memory accommodatingly draws a veil over all unpleasantness, secreting all our past hurts and humiliations in its deepest recesses so that ordinarily, looking back over the past, we recall only what was fine and pleasant.

Tamara never looked back into her childhood—perhaps, because there was nothing pleasant to look back to. Her childhood was joyless, and so was her early youth. No one had loved or wanted her in those years. Her mother had died when Tamara was born, leaving her on Grandmother's hands. Grandmother had been old and tired, her store of love expended. She had had no wish for new ties, new affection.

"My poor, unhappy daughter," Tamara had often heard her say. "It would have been better a thousand times if the child had died, not she."

Perhaps that was so. But these words had weighed upon Tamara from earliest childhood as a bitter slight.

"Do you want me to die?" she had asked Grandmother, when she was only three. And Grandmother had complained of her to her son, Armenak.

"Just like her father!" she had said. "The same insolent eyes, the same insolent talk. It's his blood, his child!"

Grandmother hated Tamara's father, hated everything about him. She hated him because he had been a man without fortune or family, because he had had the effrontery to marry her daughter, because he had got himself killed in the Civil War and left the child on her hands. But Tamara—though she barely remembered her father—jealously cherished the memory of him. Only there was no one she could talk to about him, except Dunya, the washerwoman who came once a month.

"He's not really dead, you know, Auntie Dunya," she would say. "It's just that he's far, far away. I know where he is, only I can't tell you. But he'll come and he'll bring me everything. And then I can buy

you some new rubbers. Would you like me to?"

"I should say so!" Auntie Dunya would reply. "Won't I be glad, just! Because those old rubbers of mine are all torn and leaky. I'll come to do the washing, and you'll say to me, 'Here, Auntie Dunya, new rubbers for you!' "

And the little girl and the bent old washerwoman would laugh together, happily.

But then Grandmother would come into the kitchen and glancing at them suspiciously, send Tamara to her room. That Tamara made easy friendships with simple people seemed to Grandmother but one more indication of the objectionable qualities inherited from her father. Grandmother herself had been born a Galoyan. Her father's fruit shop had catered to the town's most distinguished families. And she had married Grikor Zurabyan, who to the day of his death had been the trusted employee of a big commercial firm. The whole town had known Grikor Zurabyan. Altogether, there were only two families in town deserving respect: the Galoyans—all, without exception, and the Zurabyans—with some reservations. As for all the others, Grandmother felt

herself fully entitled to look down on them. There was only one person she loved—her son Armenak, a lonely, splenetic man, indifferent to everything that went on around him. Before the Revolution he had been working with the same firm to which his late father had devoted his life. After the Revolution he had taken a position in a cooperative organization. So far as he was concerned, nothing had changed. He was an honest and reliable employee. Once he had been accorded recognition—that was the brightest memory of his life. The owner of the firm had sent for all his employees, and pointed to a heap of scraps extracted from their waste baskets. How careless, how negligent they were, he had complained, with their employer's property! Like enemies—yet was it not he who gave them their daily bread! Only one, among them all, was worthy; only one was careful with his employer's money.

From the heap of crumpled sheets—covered with writing on one side only, in a sprawling hand—he had picked out bits covered with tiny, crabbed letters, on both sides, from edge to edge and from top to bottom, so close that not another word could have been squeezed in

anywhere. Uncle Armenak's drafts! It is not every man whose life has moments of such full recognition, such complete triumph!

"They knew how to value people," Grandmother would say, nodding her head, her eyes smiling back into the past.

But Tamara's voice, wrathful, adamant, would at once be raised in protest:

"Of course, you had it easy in the old days. That's because you were bourgeois."

And Grandmother would pour herself a dose of tincture of valerian. Fifteen drops.

"Where does the child get her ideas, where, good Lord?" she would whisper, with quivering lips.

The large southern town in which they lived was a place of age-old traditions and strong individuality.

It had, too, a revolutionary past that lent an unfading glory to many of its streets and houses: the seminary, the little house where the underground printing press had been, the ancient prison.

Here, the best pages in human history were in creation. But another life, too, persisted in the town, a life already doomed but still insisting on its rights, refusing to believe that it

must end, clutching with old tentacles at the new shoots.

Mansions, some proud, others ornate and coquettish, stood along the town's main streets surrounded by dark cypresses, blue spruces and fancifully trimmed myrtle bushes. The town lay on a hilly terrain, with many ups and downs, and a river cutting it in two. It was like a little kingdom, with its metropolis and its provinces—the outlying districts. Each section had its own character, its own customs, its own type of residents. Along the river banks the houses were small and stunted, and huddled one against another. The foundations of many of them were sunk in the river's greenish waters. From a distance, their stone walls green with the years and the damp and overgrown with ivy and wild grape vines, they presented a picturesque sight. Built centuries ago, they had seen many generations come and go, had grown dilapidated, and were soaked with all the different smells of human habitation. Narrow, crooked little streets led up to them, imprisoned by overhanging balconies, their fancy woodwork like fine lace. From early morning, donkeys laden with jugs of buttermilk trudged through these wind-

ing alleys. Each to a singsong tune of his own, the hawkers would call their wares: "*Matsoni! Matsoni!*"—or, "Greens, fresh greens!"—or, "Cornel! Cornel! Cornel jam is best!"

Here, people lived close together, in cramped intimacy; lived year after year, surrounded by the same neighbours. There was nothing about one another they did not know. Prying eyes would mark the quality of the bedding brought out to air, and the quantity of the washing drying on the line. Wizened, neat little old ladies, foaming white tulle peeping from under their black silk shawls, stand at their gates, bandying succinct bits of gossip:

"Shushanik Revazova has bought a turkey."

"The Kalustyans eat nothing but potatoes, but they've managed a fine new coat for their daughter."

"Some people know how to live."

"Shoemaker Makar's had a row with his wife again."

The old ladies exchange understanding smiles. To laugh aloud would be improper. From early youth they have been versed in the art of smiling with only their eyes and the corners of their mouths. With keen appraisal,

they follow the progress of every passer-by. They know everyone in the neighbourhood, for it is here that they grew up, here that old age overtook them. Infrequently, the monotony of their lives is broken by a noisy wedding or a no less noisy funeral. And the funerals, really, are rather more interesting than the weddings!

When evening comes, and Uncle Armenak gets home from work, Grandmother will tell him:

"Anyone would like to die in such style! The coffin was carried all the way to the grave with the men holding it above their heads. There were two bands taking turns playing. A quart of wine poured over the grave. And dinner for fifty guests. Devoted children. Spared no expense. Saw to it their father had a good funeral."

"Humph!" Tamara puts in. "When Uncle Simon took ill, he begged and begged Sandro to call in a specialist. But Sandro wouldn't, he said a specialist cost too much."

"Children must never interrupt their elders," Grandmother reproves her sternly.

The early years of the Revolution wrought little change in the mode and tenor of their

lives. Grandmother was the mistress of two small rooms and an entry hall fitted up as a kitchen. As far back as Tamara could remember, nothing in these rooms had been changed or shifted. The dark red tallboy and the drab, moth ball-smelling wardrobe stood immovably against the bedroom walls. Uncle Armenak's spring bedstead was covered year after year with the same time-darkened pique spread. On the wall over the bed in carved wooden frames hung portraits of Grandmother's mother- and father-in-law, the coal-black eyes dead and unseeing. But the family were used to them, and never noticed what they looked like. The other room was called the dining-room. A massive sideboard occupied one wall. The sideboard was very old. The hollows on its carved doors were grey with dust that could never be removed. There was a stale smell in its dark depths. Bread would blossom out in mould if left inside for a night.

Though no strangers were ever in the house, everything was kept under lock and key. Grandmother trusted no one.

"Why did you leave the milk-woman alone in the kitchen? She's sure to steal something!"

And Tamara would return to the entry where there was an oil-stove on a stool, and several pots and pans on a little table covered with a torn oil-cloth. She would be terribly uncomfortable. The milk-woman, she thought, must surely realize what she was there for. She would make polite conversation, asking after the woman's family and all her children. Once, she pulled the red ribbon from her plait and thrust it into the startled woman's pocket. "It's for your little girl," she said with a careless air, though she knew she would be in for it because nothing ever escaped Grandmother's vigilant eye.

Grandmother liked to have the house well stocked with food. She would buy wholesale, from the peasants at the market, in autumn mostly, for things are cheaper then.

Of a Sunday, when the market stalls overflowed with produce, Grandmother, in a black dress and mauve kerchief, would set out to make her purchases. Moving along the dairy rows she would stop by a counter, pick up a piece of cheese, rub it between her fingers, sniff at it, lay it on her tongue, and for several moments be engrossed in a profound consideration of its quality.

"How much?" she would ask, barely opening her lips.

The vendor, who had been hopefully and eagerly watching her every movement, would reply quickly, "For you—forty kopeks a pound. Excellent cheese!"

"Two pounds for twenty-five kopeks," Grandmother would bring out majestically.

Amazingly, they would strike a bargain in the end.

At home, the cheese would be cut up and put into brine. Generally, toward the middle of winter it would either go sour or turn hard as stone. And the rice would begin to crawl with little black bugs. Through the winter evenings, while Uncle Armenak played solitaire, Grandmother and Tamara would pick over the rice. None of them spoke, except that once in a while Uncle Armenak might relate some happening at his office.

"He thinks no one suspects anything. But I see through all his tricks. The man's not born that can take in Armenak Zurabyan! But it's no concern of mine, and so I keep my mouth shut. Why make enemies?"

"See he doesn't drag you into it," Grandmother would warn him.

"What business is it of mine? It's got nothing to do with me. I do my work honestly, and I hold my tongue. Whoever wants to, can clear it up. I don't have to stick my neck out."

"Yes, since it doesn't concern you, that's the best thing you can do."

And Uncle Armenak would go back to his solitaire, smiling to himself and humming some dreary tune while he shifted the time-darkened cards about. Tamara would bend over the rice, picking out the bugs and dropping them into a bowl of water. The clock ticked loudly on the wall. But time dragged slowly, oh, so slowly! Then Grandmother would unlock the sideboard and take down a shrivelled apple from the top shelf. Half of the apple went to Uncle Armenak, the rest was divided between Tamara and Grandmother. When Tamara had eaten her quarter she would spread her sheet on the sofa and go to sleep.

She no longer dreamed about her father being alive and returning to her some day—that dream belonged to her childhood, and her childhood was over. No one in the house ever mentioned her father since the day when the ten-year-old Tamara had declared vehemently, her voice shrill with passion:

"My father was a Bolshevik—there! And he's dead. And don't you dare call him names, or . . . or talk about him. . .!"

No, Tamara no longer dreamed of the impossible. Her problem now was to find some way of tricking Grandmother and getting an evening free to go to the theatre. Tamara's class-mates had begun joining the Komsomol. They attended concerts and debates. The girls wore mannish caps and blue sateen blouses à la Tolstoi—such was the style of the day. But all that was forbidden to Tamara. After school she must be home promptly at the appointed hour. Grandmother was suspicious and adamant. The red kerchiefs worn by girls in the Komsomol were in her eyes an unmistakable sign of dissipation.

"Abandoned girls," she would say, pursing her lips. "Shouting and laughing in the streets and nibbling sunflower seeds!"

And then and there she would cite the edifying story of what decorous conduct and modesty had done for a girl. The girl always walked sedately, never lifting her eyes from the ground. And her virtue had been rewarded—an excellent young man of very good family had honoured her by making her his wife.

Thus did Grandmother try to bring up Tamara. But Tamara was little influenced by her sermons. There was only one brief period between the ages of twelve and fourteen when she had the short-lived desire to be a model of decorum and propriety, so that the old ladies, standing at their gates, might look at her admiringly as she passed by, and say: "There goes Manishak Zurabyan's granddaughter. Such a fine girl. A treasure! A jewel! Modest, hard-working, capable!"

During this period Tamara kept the rooms very clean, the floors well waxed, the oil-stove scoured till it shone. Of an afternoon she would sit on the balcony with her needlework or, perhaps, a book. Chary of any display of affection, Grandmother would stroke her hair and produce some "surprise"—a sweet or a handful of nuts.

But Tamara soon tired of playing the prim young lady. The life going on around her was far too interesting to be sacrificed for the sake of the approval of a few shrivelled old women. It now became her chief daily ambition to fool Grandmother and get away from the house.

"Why are you so scared of her?" Tina Lomidze would ask her.

Tina was Tamara's class-mate, a plump girl with merry blue eyes and rosy, dimpled cheeks. She came of a wonderful family that lived a strange, muddled life. Everyone in it went to school—Tina and her brothers in the daytime, their parents in the evenings. As often as not, instead of dinner they would have fried eggs, or simply cheese and sausage and tea. It amused Tamara that they bought the cheese at the cooperative shop, half a pound at a time.

"I'm getting student tickets to *The Gadfly*," Tina might say. "You're the only one in our class that hasn't seen *The Gadfly*, and it's a shame! Face the old lady with the fact. Just say, 'I'm going to the theatre!' What is this, after all!"

"That's it, what is this . . ." Tamara thought. But then, at home, Grandmother would say, "No," shutting her ears to all Tamara's arguments. Tamara hated her strong face, her tightly compressed lips, her sallow cheeks framed in tight ringlets.

But it was impotent, this hatred. Manishak Zurabyan was justly honoured by all the old ladies round about as a worthy guardian of hearth and home. Was it not she who had set

her husband up in the world? Was it not she who had prevented her son from marrying a Russian girl? Her only failure had been her daughter—and was that not why she was so strict with her grand-daughter?

Grandmother would set an hour: "Be home at ten." And Tamara had to lie, to invent extra lessons, a friend's illness, the need to visit the library. Be home, when life held so much that was new and interesting! It was full of events, of activity—all centring around the Wood-workers' Factory Club. A cultural exchange had been established between the factory and the school. Here a debate had been held to discuss *The Komsomol Member and What He Must Be Like*, and once they had even secured the presence of two well-known poets who came all the way from Moscow to give read-ings, answer questions and furnish advice to anyone who wanted it. And Tamara had been eager to stay and listen, for did she not write poetry herself! Instead, she had had to rush off home for the clock showed ten minutes to eleven and it made all the difference, your coming home at five minutes to eleven or at five minutes past!

The October celebrations for which the

school was preparing a big concert were near at hand. Tamara, a participant, was to recite her poems. Comrade Lorik, secretary of the Woodworkers' Komsomol branch, came to the school for the rehearsal. All the girls said about him that he was symbolic of the new man and the true Komsomol. And, indeed, they were not mistaken. When the rehearsal was over, he came up to Tamara and said: "You were pretty good, we'll put you on first."

Later, Tina came running and told her with an air of importance that Comrade Lorik had actually offered to recommend Tamara for membership in the Komsomol if she thought of joining, for, as he had said, the Komsomol needed people of talent.

But Grandmother, when she learned that the concert was to be held at a factory club, put her foot down. "No," she said, "that is no place for a girl from a respectable family."

Unexpectedly, Uncle Armenak intervened.

"Look here, Mother," he said, "it might be wrongly interpreted if she does not attend."

Tamara had to be at the club at eight, but Grandmother began hurrying her as early as six.

"If you're there early, you'll get back early," she insisted. "You are to be at home eleven sharp, you hear!"

The hall of the factory club was too small to hold all the people who thronged to the concert; even the aisles were crowded, and all the doors had to be kept open.

Something went wrong with the electricity, and the repairs took a long time. The speaker was an hour late, and after he had delivered his address, the pianist was discovered to be missing. All the vocal numbers had to be called off, and oral recitation came to the rescue. The first to go on was Tamara. She was nervous and spoke in a voice so low that the audience had to keep silent to hear her at all. Comrade Lorik did the announcing. And when the concert was drawing to a close and a schoolgirl was stumbling and faltering her way through the *Turkish March*, he came up to Tamara again and said:

"I'll put you on a second time. The public liked you."

The applause was so hearty—Tamara's class-mates clapping with particular enthusiasm—that Comrade Lorik made Tamara go out on the stage three times to acknowledge it.

It was past one when they all trooped home together, Comrade Lorik among them.

Tina was in raptures.

"Anything may happen, you know," she eagerly exclaimed, "Tamara may start a new poetic school yet!"

Then they sang *From the Taiga to the British Seas*, their voices resounding through the dark and empty streets. And Comrade Lorik said they were not to mind, that it would do the Philistines good to be roused from their slumber!

At the gate of Tamara's house stood Grandmother wrapped in a black shawl. She waited in silence for Tamara to come close and then, in sight of all of Tamara's friends she struck her with force across the face once, twice, again and again.... Then, still saying no word, she turned away and went quickly toward the house.

Tamara gasped for breath. She looked at her friends standing some distance away, a dark, silent group.

Then she lunged against the gate, throwing her weight against it. Only later did she realize that the door had been held by a latch which had snapped open at the pressure.

Grandmother was making her bed, her black shawl lying on the floor.

"I hate your house!" Tamara screamed. "I hate it! I'll go away...."

Uncle Armenak, sleepy-eyed, rushed in in his underwear from the next room. The neighbours, startled awake, were stirring about on the other side of the wall; one of them even came out on the balcony. Grandmother went on smoothing out her blanket; then, soundlessly, she slid to the floor.

Afterwards, she was gravely ill, and Tamara had to leave school. One day was monotonously like the next: Tamara rose early, made tea for Uncle Armenak on the oil-stove, did the rooms and cooked the family's simple meals.

Grandmother hardly spoke to Tamara. An endless stream of relatives came to see her, they talked in soft whispers at her bedside, and as they left, they nodded coldly to Tamara.

Tina would sometimes run in for a moment, saying:

"Comrade Lorik has been asking about you. He was surprised you were taking it so to

heart. He said a show trial could be arranged to teach the old lady a lesson."

Tamara would give a mirthless laugh.

Grandmother lay there, sallow-cheeked, with a bitter, tortured face. Once, coming noiselessly into the room, Tamara saw the old woman shaking her head sorrowfully and lifting and dropping her hands. Her lips were moving soundlessly. This was no masterful, crushing force Tamara saw, but a little old woman who had outlived her day, the mother of the mother Tamara had never known. Tamara went up to Grandmother's bed and bent over it as though to dust the head board. Grandmother laid her hand on Tamara's head and wept.

"I want nothing for myself. It's you I'm thinking of...."

But that had only been a passing moment and it had changed nothing. Grandmother was soon up and about again, and life resumed its former course. Tamara now loathed the house more than ever, but she had fallen so far behind in her studies that there was no sense in going back to school. After some discussion, Grandmother and Uncle Armenak agreed that the best thing for her was to learn to type. Their neighbour, an old man, owned a

decrepit Remington and for ten rubles he showed Tamara how to handle it. Tamara practised hard. Uncle Armenak used his old connections to find her a suitable job. For Tamara a job, any job, was a dream come true. To have money and a pursuit of her own, to meet new people, to be one of a working collective—what else could a person wish for! But Grandmother worked for Tamara's happiness in her own way. One Saturday she said:

"I'll need your help. We're having guests tomorrow."

Once or twice a year Grandmother would have her friends and relations in for tea. On these occasions the silver tea-spoons and sugar-bowl would be polished with chalk. After tea they would all enthusiastically play lotto. Always the same people, the same refreshments, the same talk.

But this time something extraordinary was in the offing. For once Grandmother let her usual economy go to the winds and held back not a spoonful of butter nor an egg of the good things that went into her baking.

"Wax the floors, wash all the dishes, put on your new dress!" Grandmother ordered.

Tamara did not mind. It was a change, and she welcomed it. By evening there was a row of sparkling glasses on the table and crystal jars boasting four kinds of jam: dark purple cherries; amber-hued ones with the juice inside them flavoured with vanilla; glacé walnuts, a preserve demanding three weeks of vigilance and unremitting care; transparent strawberries. There was a large platter of *pahlava*, honey trickling from the diamond-shaped pieces, and glass bowls of almond cakes, pale with powdered sugar, and of brown, flaky *gata*.

Grandmother, different from her usual self, was a gracious and kindly hostess. Uncle Armenak, clean-shaven and wearing a new serge suit, and stout, bald-headed Artem, the beautiful Nutsa's husband, sat facing each other over a game of backgammon. The ladies made conversation, while the men concentrated on moving the dice over the board, words that sounded like incantations falling from their lips: *shesh oo besh, panj oo yek.*

Before the arrival of the guests Grandmother gave Tamara a lecture on how she was expected to behave:

"A young girl must be the adornment of the house. She must entertain the guests with light, gay talk, know just when to offer tea, to smile and please...."

Tamara tried desperately to think of a suitable subject to discuss with wizened old Sapron, Grandmother's friend, or with the beautiful Nutsa, who rouged heavily in an attempt to look younger. But all Tamara's efforts at entertaining the visitors failed, and she tried to make up for it by urging them again and again to have more tea.

"My dear Manish," said the beautiful Nutsa, throwing Grandmother a look out of her mascara-ringed eyes and playing with the rings on her wax-like hand, "when next you invite me to your house, I shall certainly have fish for dinner. I want to be thirsty for my tea."

The guests smiled approvingly. All of them were being very kind to Tamara. Sato, a round little old lady whom Tamara liked more than the others, kissed her and even shed a few tears.

All the usual people were present but someone else was evidently expected. A full kettle was kept on the boil in the kitchen, and Grand-

mother had so placed her guests that several seats were left free close to her own. Everyone had had his second glass of tea when the animated hum of voices suddenly broke off. Grandmother, her head held high, hurried to the door. Uncle Armenak jumped to his feet, upsetting an ashtray. The guests tensely watched the door.

Into the room sailed a stout, puffy-cheeked woman with very black hair and thick, heavy brows. She was the dominating figure of a trio: at one side of her she had a round-faced, puny old man who walked with mincing steps, and at the other, a youth of haughty bearing, as puffy-cheeked, heavy-browed and black-haired as his mother.

Grandmother showed the new arrivals to the chairs that had been set apart for them, but the black-haired woman waved her off condescendingly and with an air of polished urbanity went up to each person at the table in turn, extending a stiff, stubby-fingered hand and introducing herself with a short: "Anechka." The youth followed her. Scraping his feet and shaking back his thick hair he, too, gave his name: "Eddy." The puny old man made up the rear. Trotting up behind his son he brushed

the guests' hands with a limp, flaccid palm and muttered something unintelligible.

Anechka sank into her chair, smoothing out the long-tasseled, white silk shawl she wore round her shoulders, so that all could admire her thick gold bracelet and her diamond earrings. Tamara, who had been quietly watching from the kitchen, hastily poured three glasses of tea and carried them into the room on a small tray.

"And this is my grand-daughter Tamara," Grandmother said.

Eddy sprang from his chair, rushed to Tamara and held out his hand. But he was forced to wait respectfully till Grandmother had relieved her of her tray.

Anechka, accepting a glass of tea from Tamara, raised two plump fingers and patted her cheek. There were a few moments of silence while Grandmother heaped three small glass saucers with jam for the new arrivals. But Anechka declined everything: "We've just had our tea at home." Uncle Armenak fussed about silently wondering if it was proper for him to go back to his game of *nardi*. But the beautiful Nutsa was not one to allow anyone to outshine her in society.

"Oh, we've all had our tea at home," she said, "but it's particularly delicious when served by our own darling little Tamara!"

"Then I'll have two glasses," said Eddy gallantly, with a loud laugh.

Anechka smiled and nodded graciously, and a new ripple of small talk ran round the table.

"Go and speak to the young man," Grandmother whispered to Tamara.

Tamara took a seat near Eddy and while she was wondering what to say to him, he turned to her with a question:

"Do you play?"

"Play what?" Tamara was puzzled.

"The piano. No? Now isn't that a pity. I adore music! I feel it so deeply when anyone plays. There's a girl I know who hasn't got any looks to speak of but when she sits down to the piano, I simply worship her!"

"Why don't you ask him to sing for you?" Anechka said meaningfully.

Tamara had no idea how to form such a request. It was awkward to badger anyone with a "Sing for us, please!" But the worldly Nutsa was quick to meet the emergency.

"Let's beg our new friend Eddy to sing for us," she drawled.

Grandmother's lady friends nodded approvingly and prepared to listen.

Eddy jumped up readily, and gripping the back of a chair with his hands, began to sing. He had undeniably an excellent ear for music, and he put much feeling into his performance. From Tamara's point of view, too much! She was embarrassed when Eddy, winding up the song with the expressive: "You are divine, I worship you!" addressed these words directly to her.

There was much clapping of hands, and Anechka, with a smile which meant, "That was nothing! Wait till you hear some more!" said: "Ask him to sing *Dark Eyes*."

"*Dark Eyes*, Eddy! *Dark Eyes*!" they all cried.

Dark Eyes was also addressed to Tamara, and while he sang, Tamara caught the sly, smiling, meaningful glances of the guests straying from her to the thick-browed Eddy and back again.

"What does it all mean?" she thought in sudden panic. Then she knew. Why, it was all done on purpose, she was being made a show of, and Eddy, Eddy was their choice of a husband for her!

"What a pleasant, well-bred young man! The life of a party! What was it he said to you?" Grandmother asked her after the guests had gone.

Grandmother could set her mind at rest. Eddy had overlooked Tamara's inability to play the piano and had invited her to the theatre.

Tamara did not want to go into any explanations. Grandmother would only have another heart attack and Tamara, fettered by pity, her hopes crushed, would be sitting by her bedside again with the feeling that she had killed her. She lay through the night on her hard bed, cold as an icicle, despair in her heart.

Two days later, taking advantage of a moment when Grandmother was out, Tamara hastily packed some of her belongings and left the house. At the market by the railroad station she sold to the first buyer that came along her only possession of value—a thin golden chain. With the money she bought a railroad ticket.

The town to which Tamara came was as ancient as its name, and as young as its resurrected people. It used to be a place of

squat, clay huts, but it had easily and willingly cast off its old guise, building, growing in height and breadth, refashioning old streets, laying new ones. Here, at every step, antiquity neighboured with modernity, crooked alleys and gates with iron hammers over them brushed shoulders with the light pillars and towering magnificence of new buildings. There was a rosy glow over the town as if the sun never stopped rising over it day and night, an effect due to the pink, coral and red of the volcanic rock of which the houses were built.

Tamara left her belongings in the luggage-room and not knowing what else to do, went strolling aimlessly through the streets. Here, on these streets, in these houses, lived those who were later to become her friends, her nearest and dearest. But none of them knew her then. They did not know that she was lonely, miserable, badly in need of help and affection. People hurried past her, chatting busily, intent on their own affairs. Each had his home, his place in life.

"Carry on while there's breath in your body!"—this was a favourite saying of Dunya,

the washerwoman. Tamara, remembering it, felt cheered.

She spent the night at the Collective Farmer's Home, and in the morning, reading through a multitude of advertisements in the "Help Wanted" section of the paper, she found one that suited her. A large power plant construction project offered employment to men and women skilled in various trades; inexperienced labour, too, was wanted—young people for apprentice jobs.

Thus life began.

* * *

When Tamara opened her eyes after her brief sleep sunlight was flooding the room. She jumped up quickly and threw on a morning-gown. Ruben was gone. Tamara glanced at her watch: of course, he would already be at the laboratory.

Bursting in through the open windows was the freshness of morning, together with the clear, ringing noises of the street. Tamara thrust her head out of the window. There it lay, the town that was so dear to her heart, the town with the rosy halo over it!

There were voices in the dining-room. Marjik and Uncle Armenak were chatting over their breakfast.

"Are you going to live with us always now?" Tamara heard her little daughter ask.

"Oh, no!" Uncle Armenak replied, and there was a ring of pride in his voice. "Do you think they'd let me go, at the office? I'm my chief's right hand. I've been sent here on business."

"Then you're on an expedition?"

"An expedition? No. A business trip."

"Well, Mother sometimes goes on expeditions," Marjik explained, adding with a sigh: "and then she stays away such a long time."

"What does she do there on those expeditions?" Uncle Armenak asked curiously.

And Tamara smiled, thinking that he had not grasped much of her thesis the other day if he could ask that.

"She catches cosmic rays."

"Catches what?"

"Rays. Don't you know about them? There's a kind of case, it's called a camera. It just stands there and doesn't make a sound. Then suddenly it goes: 'Click!' Aha, got one! One

ray, and then another and another. When it says, 'Click!' it means it's made a catch."

"Hm-m...." Uncle Armenak digested the information in silence. "How much does she get for it?"

"Get what?"

"Money. Salary."

"Oh, a lot—a thousand rubles." This was the biggest figure Marjik could think of.

"Hm...." Uncle Armenak was doubtful. "More, I should think."

"More? Yes, of course!" Marjik readily agreed.

"How is it that you, a big girl, don't know how much your mother earns?" Uncle Armenak asked her in admonishing tones. "And, I must say," he went on, "I don't like it one bit that you address everyone in the 'thou' form. It isn't polite. You're only a chit. You must respect your elders. Is it right, do you think, to say 'thee' to your Grandma Arus? Or your mother. A most honoured and influential man comes to town especially on her account, and you speak to her so disrespectfully!"

"How must I speak to her?" Marjik asked.

"You must say, 'You, Mother,' never, 'thou.'"

Marjik thought it over.

"No, I can't, I've known her for too long."

"Well, you've only known me for a short time, yet you say 'thou' to me!"

Tamara walked in. It was time she put an end to Uncle Armenak's pedagogical exercises.

Uncle Armenak was taking the afternoon train home, and he still had a few matters to attend to.

"I'm quite content where you are concerned," he told Tamara at parting. "You are very well off."

Tamara clumsily thrust several hundred-ruble bills into his coat pocket.

"Please don't think my finances are low," he said. "They value me very highly at the office."

He took the crumpled bills from his coat pocket and put them carefully away in his wallet. "Next time they send me on a business trip I'll come straight to you!" he promised.

Tamara left the house with him. They said good-bye on the corner of a broad avenue, and Uncle Armenak hurried off, squeezing his brief-case to his side.

And Tamara stood there watching the distance between them grow greater and greater until at last the man's retreating figure was lost to view among the passers-by.

THE DOCTOR FROM ZAREVSHAN

On Saturday, Zarik had shorter reception hours than usual. The harvesting had begun, a time when collective farmers rarely bother their doctor. Taking her field kit, Zarik made a round of the nearest field stations and attended to a few minor injuries. She took some eyewash and tampons to the threshing-floor where people were always getting dust motes in their eyes.

After serving out the disinfectant-soaked pieces of gauze, Zarik stopped to admire the running, rustling grain.

"Come on over, Zarik!" called Aspram, a dark little woman, her shoulders and head thickly powdered with dust.

"Here, Zarik! Give us a hand!"—this from

some women who were binding up sacks of new grain.

They were all childhood friends of Zarik's, side by side with whom she had often worked in the years before she had won her degree on this very threshing-floor. She would gladly have stayed there longer, if it had not been for her disappointment with Avak Santrosyan, the farm brigade leader. She had met him with the happy news that she had found some large scoop spades in the store-room that would do perfectly for the swamp-work, but Avak had guiltily averted his gaze and mumbled in reply:

"There'll be no swamp-work this week."

"What do you mean?"

"Galust's orders. We've got to finish harvesting."

The Chairman again! What did he care about malaria? The man saw no further than his own nose.

"Where's Galust? Where's the Chairman?" she asked and asked again. But she could not find him anywhere. He had gone for the day to the farm's highland plots.

On her way back to the dispensary Zarik, very much upset, stopped in at the school

where the summer day-nursery was housed. The window blinds were down, and the rooms were quiet and cool. The children were sleeping. Zarik went up and down the rows of small beds.

There, breathing softly and evenly, was plump little Anush, Aspram's daughter, her arms flung out and her little fists tightly clenched; and there, the sheet kicked back and one naked little leg showing, was everybody's favourite, Ashotik. Zarik was sorely tempted to stop at his bedside for a few moments, but she passed on quickly: Ashotik was her nephew and it would not do for anyone to get the impression that the doctor's attentions were unequally distributed. But Zarik lingered for a long minute by the last bed, gazing down at a thin, delicate little girl. The baby had been still-born. How desperately Zarik had struggled over the tiny blue body, fighting to fan the flickering spark of life!

"What are you doing? It's no use!" they had told her. "You can't revive the dead." But Zarik had succeeded, and the world was the richer by one more human life. Such a sweet child, too, she had turned out to be!

Close behind Zarik, almost stepping on her heels, minced Manish, a round little garrulous woman who was in charge of the nursery and very proud of it.

"I come to the storehouse this morning for my butter," she intoned, "and the man gives me salt butter. Salt butter for the children! So I say to him very calmly: 'And who are you keeping the sweet butter for?' 'Sweet butter,' he says, 'why, we're taking it to town to sell. The Chairman's orders,' he says. Did I burn! I took that butter and pushed it in his face...."

Zarik measured Manish with a look.

"Well, I threw it back into the barrel, anyway," Manish corrected herself. 'Why,' I said to him, I said, 'the doctor'll wring my neck if I give the children salt butter!' And he said: 'What doctor? Is it Sako Saroyan's daughter you mean? That's nothing, that doesn't scare me any."

"And the butter?"

"Oh, I got the butter. Do you think he'd dare to cross me?"

Zarik, stepping out on to the sun-flooded veranda, saw a bare-footed little girl rushing towards the school over the deserted yellow highway.

"Come quickly, Zarik, Amo's sick!" the child called, out of breath.

As she went with her Zarik asked herself again if to have come back to her native village after graduating had been wise. But, then, where else could she have gone? Here, in Zarevshan, was her home, the man she loved, here everything was dear and familiar.

But it had not worked out so well. It was difficult to win the respect a doctor is entitled to in a community where everyone remembered you as a little girl, where even the children addressed you by your first name. The collective-farm chairman, for instance—he simply did not see Zarik as a person of authority; her requests went unheeded, and he disregarded a decree passed by the District Executive Committee and the Village Soviet to have the swamp drained.

Zarik entered the sick man's house. On the ottoman, under a thick blanket of unbelievably bright wool, lay a young man, his handsome face flushed with fever.

"What's your trouble, Amo?" asked Zarik, chagrined and sympathetic.

"Do something, Zarik," Amo pleaded, a contrite look in his bloodshot eyes. "This is no time for me to be lying around."

"You tell him, Zarik, you tell him! He's all ready to jump out of bed and go to work. If he hadn't gone where he did, he'd be all right now."

"Mother!" Amo groaned.

"Where did he go?" Zarik asked mechanically, studying the thermometer. "I thought so! Nearly forty."

"I'll tell you where. He went to Avanlu. Goes there nearly every night. That's why he's sick."

Helping her patient roll over on his back, Zarik felt the swelling roundness of his spleen under her fingers. So that was why the old woman had mentioned Avanlu!

"Malaria," Zarik said.

"That's what I said, too," Amo's mother chimed in.

In the little yard outside, pouring water over Zarik's hands, she added, as though in justification of her son:

"His girl lives in Avanlu. They're going to be married in the autumn."

As you stood in the yard, overlooking a

precipice, you realized how high up in the mountains lay the village of Zarevshan. The hills, running in a billowing line into the distance, grew steeper and steeper, till, as they reached the horizon, they became lofty mountains which shut in a spacious valley. Down below there was a small river winding across the valley and on to the village of Avanlu. This river was Zarik's chief concern and the cause of Amo's illness. In spring and summer, when the mountain snows melted, it overflowed, forming a small swamp which worried no one until several people in Avanlu and Zarevshan had taken to their beds with malaria.

This was all the more unpleasant because the disease was now a rarity in the republic where all malarial nidi had long since been destroyed.

Zarik was rather proud of having been the one to get an investigating committee to come and order the swamp drained.

The swamp was not big. It was sprayed with a special compound destructive to the larvae of the malarial mosquito, and the collective farmers of Avanlu and Zarevshan were called upon to do the draining.

"The spraying has not helped," thought Zarik sadly, looking at the moaning Amo. "Why are there more cases of malaria here in Zarevshan than in Avanlu, I wonder? The swamp lies on Avanlu land and is closer to Avanlu, but hardly anyone there has been a victim, only newcomers to the place and people from Zarevshan who have gone down to the valley. I must ask Bagrat Sergeyevich about it."

Since there was to be no swamp-work that day it would be a good thing, Zarik thought, to go down to Avanlu and take some of the new data she had collected to Bagrat Sergeyevich.

There was a man who knew how to command respect! Unlike her, Bagrat Sergeyevich never went out on calls after working hours, except, perhaps, in cases of extreme urgency. "I am engaged in research and must have peace," he had once declared. There had been unquestioned finality in the statement. Everyone, including the farm chairman himself, stood in awe of Bagrat Sergeyevich. "Our Dr. Bagrat's smarter than any professor," the farmers said of him. And Zarik had always admitted his superiority. It was a good

thing that so knowing and experienced a specialist was at hand, even though her pride might suffer because of it.

"I'm going to Avanlu!" the Chairman's mother-in-law, troubled with chronic rheumatism, had said the other day. "Dr. Bagrat will give me that ointment of his. It's very good."

"I can write out the prescription for the ointment myself," Zarik had said crossly. "Dr. Bagrat will not receive you. Why should he?"

"Oh, yes, he will!" And the old woman had smiled slyly. "I know how to get around him. I'll go to see his mother first, she likes it when you show her proper respect. Don't you take it to heart, though, you're a good doctor, too," she had added condescendingly, seeing Zarik's distress. It was hard taking remarks such as this in one's stride, even though Zarik not infrequently had to seek Bagrat Sergeyevich's advice.

"You'd be doing me a big favour, my dear colleague, if you kept a detailed account of all cases of infectious diseases in your district," he had said to Zarik the first day they had met.

That had been over a year ago. Now Bagrat Sergeyevich called Zarik by her first name, and Zarik punctually brought her notes to him written in her large, clear hand. She enjoyed her participation, however modest, in research.

Coming back to the dispensary Zarik took off her white coat glossy with starch. No little time had passed since her graduation, but Zarik still thrilled with secret pride at sight of her coat—not the medical student's flimsy affair this, tied in the back and at the wrists with tape, but the coat of a full-fledged physician with its large mother-of-pearl buttons and roomy pockets.

The village streets at that hour of the day were deserted. Only the old women sat on their wooden balconies, sorting corn or spinning wool.

In the morning's sultry calm Zarik's little daughter Karinka seemed particularly alive and fresh. She darted out from the gate of the house and, laughing happily, ran toward her mother, her little arms outspread.

"You won't go out again, will you?" That was Karinka's unfailing daily question.

Zarik caught up and held the firm little body.

"Why aren't you at the kindergarten, Karinka?"

The little girl dropped her eyes guiltily.

"Everyone's asleep there," she said softly. "And I don't like sleeping."

"You've run away!" Zarik reproved. "And for this I shan't take you to see Uncle Bagrat today. I had wanted to but now I won't."

"You don't mean it, Mummy. You don't, Mummy. You'll take me, won't you? Please, Mummy! Say you'll take me!"

Karinka, trembling with eagerness, was on the verge of tears. Furious with herself for being such a weakling, Zarik said evasively:

"That depends on how you'll behave between now and evening."

In the yard, under a wooden covering, Zarik's mother-in-law was baking *lavashes*. With the artistry of a wizard she would in a matter of seconds transform the roll of dough into a longish flat cake and then bending over slap it briskly on to the red-hot floor of the underground stove. In two or three minutes the rosy, crusty *lavash* would be drawn out with a hook. Freshly baked and fragrant, they were left on the wide table or hung on the balcony's wooden railing to cool. Zarik's mother-in-law

lifted her eyes, red with the heat, to glance at Zarik. She jerked her head to indicate a middle-aged woman waiting in the yard. "To see you!" was what the movement implied. Zarik's mother-in-law, brought up in the traditions of a strict, patriarchal family, was short-spoken.

The visitor, Aunt Sona, had spread out her wide skirts fan-like over the stone tiles of the yard. At Zarik's appearance her face, burnt brick-red by the sun, instantly took on an expression of acute suffering.

"Oh! I'm in for it!" Zarik sighed.

"I feel terrible, just terrible," Aunt Sona began, as though in response to Zarik's thoughts. "My husband, he said, 'Go to the dispensary.' But no, I said to myself, why should I? Isn't the doctor the daughter of our very own Sako? Isn't she our own Gikor's sister-in-law? Are we strangers? Are not my grandmother and Gikor's mother cousins? So I said to my husband, 'Why, I'd only be hurting Zarik's feelings if I went to the dispensary.' And so here I am!"

The way it was put, Aunt Sona's visit was to have flattered Zarik.

"She probably has high blood pressure,"

thought Zarik, her gaze on Aunt Sona's huge bulk and the purplish flush on her cheeks.

"I can't sleep nights, my heart aches, my back, my hands," Aunt Sona droned. "I'm a sick woman! The Chairman says, 'Go and work on the poultry farm while we're harvesting.' But how can I...?"

Zarik's mother-in-law, shaping a new roll of dough, fixed Aunt Sona with a look. "Hungry?" she asked of Zarik.

The look and the interruption told Zarik that her husband's mother did not approve of Aunt Sona.

"You'll have to come to the dispensary, after all, I'm afraid," Zarik said. "All my instruments are there and the medicine."

"Why don't you just give me a note, for the time being?" Aunt Sona ventured.

But now Zarik knew what she must do.

"No," she said diplomatically. "You may be seriously ill and, perhaps, I'll have to send you off to town to see a specialist."

Pushing herself up from the ground with difficulty, Aunt Sona got to her feet and waddled to the gate, her skirts swinging.

"You eat," Zarik's mother-in-law said.

"Don't wait. Who knows when Arsho'll be back!"

Zarik nodded. During sowing and harvesting she did not see her husband for weeks at a time, and it had almost seemed a natural state of affairs. But just then, she longed to speak to him, to discuss the things that were troubling her.

"This harvesting's thrown everyone off balance!" she said crossly. "They don't seem to know how to organize the work properly. All other things must wait because of it!"

She made a deprecative wave of the hand and went inside.

Late in the afternoon, the collective-farm droshky drew up in front of Zarik's house. Karinka was the first to clamber up on to the seat beside the coachman, and she sat there, triumphantly eyeing her playmates who crowded round the vehicle.

The outlying districts of Zarevshan afforded an excellent view of Avanlu. The village with its many gardens stood out like a large dark blot in the valley below. The horses bore the droshky easily over the wide, hard road. The heat had abated, the sky becoming vivid and

the air transparent. A freshness was wafted in from the river. The spots of lush green sedge on its banks drew the eye to the marshy sections. Zarik looked down. There, on the very edge, traces of the work already accomplished were visible. But very little had been done, so far. The drain ditches were as thin as thread.

Down a winding, gently sloping road the horses descended into the gorge. Though the distance was paltry, a mere fifteen miles, the difference in altitude was clearly felt. It was as though a humid, pungent current was rushing towards them, forcing out the fresh, dry mountain air. Passing a belt of gardens and row upon row of vineyards, the horses carried the droshky into the village.

Zarik never ceased wondering how strikingly unlike were the two villages. Zarevshan had been painted with a sparing brush in a severely subdued combination of yellows and browns. It was all clay, sand, wheat. Avanlu was a rich green, the infinite variety of tints ranging from the pale, silvery-grey of the *pshata* trees and the tender emerald of the young grape vines to the dark green of the foamy-crowned nut-trees. Zarevshan exhaled

a dry freshness. Avanlu, abounding in gurgling brooks and ditches, gave forth a humid vapour. There was a disparity of habit and tradition, and even the household utensils were different. In Zarevshan they used flat, broad vessels: *sali*, large, plaited baskets, and trays and platters for the drying, shelling and sorting of grain. In Avanlu, there were huge earthenware jugs called *karasi*, graceful, slender-necked ewers, straw-matted bottles for holding wine and grape and mulberry vodka. The very tenor of life differed. With harvesting under way, the busiest season had begun for the hill people, while the valley led a quiet, unhurried existence. Avanlu's corn fields were not large and the grain, ripening early in the lowlands, had been gathered in long before. Avanlu's chief staple was grapes, but they had only just formed on the vines and hung like heavy, dull green beads.

Bagrat Sergeyevich met Zarik and her daughter on the front steps of a clean little white house with the sign "Dispensary" over the door.

"Karinka, run along to my mother's!" he ordered. "I've had a case today that may turn out to be measles."

Karinka ran eagerly to the back of the garden where at the door of the cottage she knew well stood a stout old woman with young, very dark eyes, smiling in welcome.

Bagrat Sergeyevich had eyes just like hers, bulging a little, sparklingly alive, looking out at the world with a gaiety and cunning that seemed to say: You needn't tell us—we knew, before ever you did.

If only Zarik had this calm poise, this confidence in herself and her abilities! They were indispensable to a doctor. "A doctor who lets his patient see the slightest hesitancy in himself doesn't amount to much," Bagrat Sergeyevich once said to Zarik. "His patient will lose all confidence in him. A good doctor is also a play-actor, to a certain extent. Self-assurance is one of our weapons."

It was easy for him with his imposing appearance to speak about self-assurance!

Zarik could never forget the time she had come to the District Health Department offices for her appointment and been asked: "And what brings you here, little girl?"

Perfect order reigned in Bagrat Sergeyevich's dispensary. It was sparklingly clean and everything was within easy reach. This

again was something that Zarik could never quite achieve in hers. And she could not explain it away by telling herself that he had three rooms at his disposal, without counting the Avanlu hospital and chemist's shop, whereas there were no such facilities at the smaller village of Zarevshan.

"You must learn to get about in your dispensary with your eyes closed," Bagrat Sergeyevich told her. "Everything in it must have its own fixed place."

This Zarik tried hard. She would frequently give the place a thorough cleaning, but she did not have the time or the patience to keep it in daily order. Getting about with her "eyes closed" was out of the question. Just the other day, shame to say, it had taken her all of five minutes, and in the presence of a patient, too, to find the required tube of potassium manganate.

Zarik sighed and sat down on a gleaming white stool.

"I'll be through in a minute, and then we'll go and have tea," Bagrat Sergeyevich said.

"I've brought you more data. This time it's Amo, our tractor-driver. He's just got back from his training courses. Laid up in the mid-

dle of harvesting. Malaria again. Progress of disease—violent. Temperature—40."

Bagrat Sergeyevich brightened up. "Splendid! Splendid! That's very important."

"What's splendid about it? Our best tractor-driver laid up just when we've got our hands full."

Someone coughed behind the partly opened dispensary door and gave it a gentle pull.

"Come in, will you!" Bagrat Sergeyevich called out. And, in an audible aside: "Who can it be now?"

An old man came in; he was rather short, with sloping shoulders and a brown, rough skin netted by lighter-coloured wrinkles. He had dressed himself with care for the visit. His bright blue shirt and new suit were creased and gave off an odour of moth balls. The old man smiled pleasantly, bowed and sat down on the chair by the table, placing his large brown hands on his knees.

"Well, Uncle Yegishe, tell us all about it. What's bothering you?" Bagrat Sergeyevich asked, pen poised over a record card.

"Oh, nothing very much, doctor," the old man answered readily. "It's just that my wife's been at me, it was she made me come.

It's not as if I was in great pain or had a fever or something. Only when I eat as much as a crumb I get that heavy feeling, as if I had swallowed a whole leg of mutton. There's a kind of weight under my heart. And I'm rather weaker than I was."

Bagrat Sergeyevich ordered his patient to strip to the waist. Unbuttoning his coat with clumsy fingers, Uncle Yegishe pulled off his shirt and undershirt. The old man's body had a yellowish tinge, contrasting strongly with the brown of his sun-tanned face and hands. He was about to say something, but Bagrat Sergeyevich cut him short unceremoniously:

"Be quiet now, will you! If there's anything I want to know, I'll ask you myself. Lie down on your back."

He sat down beside the old man on the white couch and pressed his hand on his abdominal cavity. "Now breathe. Deeper. Still deeper."

Uncle Yegishe obeyed. Bagrat Sergeyevich stood up and nodded to Zarik. You look at him, his eyes told her.

Zarik bent over the couch. Her fingers travelled over the old man's abdomen and

found what was beyond a doubt a small, hard tumour.

"How old did you say you were, Uncle Yegishe?" Bagrat Sergeyevich asked.

"Must be sixty, Son."

The old man was dressing now, calmly and unhurriedly.

Bagrat Sergeyevich asked him more questions, Zarik admiring their preciseness and clarity. Each question seemed gradually to release the illness from its pall of doubt and to expose it in its entirety.

"Now here's what I have to say," Bagrat Sergeyevich summed up briskly. "You've got to go to town, old man! They'll put you in hospital and operate."

Uncle Yegishe laughed shortly.

"Oh, no, I'm still up and about, and the thing'll pass somehow or other."

"It's not going to 'pass somehow or other,' I'm afraid. You need an operation."

Bagrat Sergeyevich wiped his hands with a towel. His tone was grave.

Uncle Yegishe was on his guard at once. A look of severity and concentration had replaced the smile in his eyes.

"I won't agree to any operation," he said sullenly.

"Think it over, Uncle Yegishe! If you come to me for help in a month's time it may be too late."

Zarik suggested her diagnosis in Latin.

"Of course! Not a shred of doubt. In all its primordial beauty!" said Bagrat Sergeyevich.

This brief exchange between the two of them in words that were incomprehensible to the patient whose fate they irrevocably sealed, depressed Zarik.

Uncle Yegishe stood there, his watchful, questioning glance straying from one doctor to the other.

"Give me something, some drug. I'm not going to any hospital!" he suddenly and resolutely demanded.

Shrugging, Bagrat Sergeyevich produced a phial with some drops. Uncle Yegishe went out, carrying the useless medicine gingerly in his hands.

"That's that!" Bagrat Sergeyevich said, glancing at his watch. "Let's go and have our tea."

He carefully gathered up the papers on his desk; then, glancing at Uncle Yegishe's

record, he wrote: "Refused to undergo operation" after the diagnosis, and began to unbutton his white coat.

"What are you going to do with him now?" Zarik asked him thoughtfully.

"With whom?" Bagrat Sergeyevich turned to her, puzzled.

Zarik nodded her head at the record.

"What *can* I do? He's not a child. Of course, the operation would definitely prolong his life by at least three years. And I have seen cases where the cure has proved permanent."

"He will surely die if he's not operated on."

"Yes, he has three or four months to go. Half a year, perhaps. He's a hardy old man."

"Well then, you must insist on the operation!"

"Would you have me drag him to the operating table by force? I have no wish to do that, nor any right, for that matter."

Bagrat Sergeyevich was showing signs of irritation, but Zarik would not give up.

"What if someone dear to you were in his place, what would you do then?"

"Don't forget, Zarik," Bagrat Sergeyevich said, and there was a stern, admonitory note in his voice, "you and I are living and work-

ing in a village. If the old man dies after the operation, the whole village will be in an uproar. They'll be saying that I sent him to his death. We must think about our professional prestige above all."

"You sound as though we were living in the past century," Zarik said. She was distressed and bewildered. They were wasting words. She saw no point in prolonging the argument.

There were some patients waiting for him in the adjoining reception room: a little old woman and a woman with a baby.

"You're late," Bagrat Sergeyevich told them. "You should have come earlier."

The woman with the baby was about to say something, and Zarik stopped, but Bagrat Sergeyevich screwed up his eyes and shook his head to show that he would hear nothing more.

"Come tomorrow. There's nothing I can do for you today. I'm only a mortal, and I need a rest."

It took a violent effort of will on the part of Zarik to suppress the almost instinctive desire to take the baby from the woman's hands and examine it.

"Pamper them once, and they won't give you a moment's rest," Bagrat Sergeyevich grumbled as he let Zarik pass on ahead to the front step of his trim little cottage, its walls overgrown with trailing grape vines.

Bagrat Sergeyevich's mother was a woman of tact and perspicacity. Grasping at once that something unpleasant had passed between her son and his "pupil," as she called Zarik in her absence, she redoubled her efforts to be kind and affable. But Zarik for some reason kept recalling the villagers' saying that Dr. Bagrat's mother secretly accepted chickens, eggs and butter from his patients by way of a fee. It was an inexcusable breach of the Soviet medical code!

Meanwhile, Bagrat Sergeyevich had regained his earlier good humour and was now pacing the floor with a glass of tea in his hands, sipping the hot, strong liquid as he walked.

"I can understand how you feel, Zarik," he was saying. "You're young, eager. But it's difficult enough to be a doctor without taking the troubles of the world upon one's shoulders. You must realize that treating sick people is your job, your profession, and you must accept it as such. That swamp draining busi-

ness now. Romantic nonsense, that's what it is! They'll drain the swamp without your help. What you've got to think of, first and foremost, is becoming a better specialist. No such incident as the one with that child must ever occur again. Don't forget, I won't always be there beside you."

Yes, there had been that shameful business of the child when Zarik had mistaken a simple bump for a sarcoma, had come rushing to Avanlu in the middle of the night, had awakened Bagrat Sergeyevich and frightened the child's parents.

"Never mind that," said Zarik stubbornly. "They've promised to send me to those extra-curriculum training courses. I'm fed up with having so many cases of malaria to treat. Why, the whole thing can be put an end to at once. And whose concern is it if not mine!"

She wanted to add, "And yours, too," but refrained.

"Very well," Bagrat Sergeyevich agreed good-naturedly. "Let's leave it so. That'll be your cause, and this—mine!" And he gave a fond slap to the folder into which he had just slipped Zarik's notes.

The thick folder inscribed "Data for Thesis"

looked important. It inspired respect. Involuntarily, Zarik recalled the narrow, inconsequential little ditches on the edge of the swamp. Her cause was showing poor progress.

The rumble of the droshky wheels was heard in the street outside. Karinka, who had been half-asleep, now started up and began to hurry her mother.

Bagrat Sergeyevich took them as far as the gate, and then went back to his dispensary.

The Chairman of the Avanlu collective farm, a noisy blustering man with massive shoulders and a thick waist, was standing by the gate among a group of villagers.

"Hello!"

Zarik's nod was cool but as she came up to him she could not refrain from stopping.

"Well, are you going to drain the swamp or not?" she asked. "Doesn't the decree of the District Executive Committee mean anything to you?"

"Indeed it does!" the Chairman replied, grinning.

"He's laughing, is he, the fat-mug!" Zarik told herself angrily.

The secretary of the farm Party Organization standing beside the Chairman looked at

Zarik with his small, closely set eyes, but said nothing.

"They're all hand in glove with one another here," Zarik decided.

"When will you go to work?" she asked, making an effort to speak calmly.

"Just as soon as you do, dear neighbours."

"We're still in the middle of harvesting. And, besides, it's your land!"

"The land's ours, that's true, and we won't deny it. Only the decree said that Zarevshan and Avanlu were to get together on this. So why should we do the work alone? It wouldn't be fair. Ask the folks here, they'll tell you."

He included the people crowding round him in a sweeping gesture as though inviting them to back him up. Zarik saw the smirks on their faces and felt that she hated this man.

"The work must be done, I agree with you," the Chairman went on. "Just as soon as you people begin, we'll be there, on the dot! But as for whether you're harvesting or not, that's your business. You work—we work. All fair and square. What do you say, doctor?"

The question was meant for Dr. Bagrat, but when Zarik turned back to look at him he had already gone in and closed the door.

The following morning Zarik woke up with the first rays of the sun. There was a freshness, a radiance in the air. But early as it was, her mother-in-law was already up and about. Never in her life had Zarik managed to be the first to rise. There she was now, getting some sharp, piquant cheese flavoured with aromatic herbs out of a jug and sprinkling water over a stack of *lavashes* for breakfast. And there was Arsho, on his way back from the tiny brook behind the house, wiping himself with a long Turkish towel.

"He'll be off again for the whole day after breakfast," Zarik thought. "When will I ever have the chance to talk to him?"

Arsho smiled at Zarik and hurried towards her. Had the two of them been alone he would have gathered his wife in his arms and tossed her into the air, but in the presence of his mother he would not even allow himself to touch her hand. But he stooped down and looked into her eyes, breathing her name tenderly: "Zaro!"

Karinka, sleepy and tousle-haired, shuffled toward them over the plank boards of the balcony, her bare feet making a slap-slap sound. Slowly, gravely, she proceeded to climb

up on her father's knees. Arsho kissed the child fondly and began putting the choicest morsels into her mouth. As they breakfasted, Zarik hurriedly related the events of the past day.

"He'll get it in the neck yet, you wait!" Arsho said, hearing about the Chairman of the Avanlu farm. "All he has on his mind is how to push his farm into the million-ruble-assets class. You shouldn't have spoken to him. He didn't say anything to hurt your feelings, did he?"

Arsho knitted his brows, and Zarik hastily passed her hand over the sleeve of his shirt. She well knew her husband's fiery temper! But his composure was soon restored.

"You mustn't worry about this, Zarik. As soon as we finish harvesting, I give you my word I'll come and help you drain the swamp and I'll bring my tractor. Well, don't you believe me?"

"No," Zarik answered him. "I know you, all of you! You'll finish harvesting, and start repairing; you'll finish repairing, and start sowing. And it isn't only that! Why did I ever agree to practise in Zarevshan? I have

no prestige here. And that cancer patient in Avanlu, I can't get him out of my mind."

"Avanlu has its own doctors. Must you go and meddle in their affairs!"

"That sounds like the old joke about the man crying, 'Help! They're robbing me!' and the militiaman calling back, 'Sorry. Not my district!' "

"Oh, I don't know," Arsho said. "If a mechanic from another shop came to my tractor station and started giving orders, I'd throw him out in no time! And don't talk to me about working anywhere else—rubbish! I don't want to hear another word about it. Where else could you work? You have your home here, your family. Do you think we'd let you go away? And as for having no prestige—well, it's your own fault."

He slipped into his working jacket which smelt of tractors and oil, kissed Karinka, patted Zarik's cheek and left.

Zarik sat on the porch step, gazing after him. Her mother-in-law came up and stood at her side. This silent and tireless woman managed the house alone and had brought up Karinka, and yet it always seemed to Zarik she was still somewhat shy of her grown-up

children. And because of this, it astonished Zarik to feel the touch of her old, dry hand on her head.

"It's a doctor's duty to make people well," the old woman said quietly. "You know that."

Zarik realized that her mother-in-law had overheard her conversation with Arsho.

"But that man lives in Avanlu, and they have their own doctors there. I mustn't interfere. There's a sort of law—professional ethics it's called."

"Ethics! Bah!" the old woman said. "Life is sweet, child, and it's hard to part with it. That sick man just doesn't understand. When he does, he'll know how foolish he was. You must make him listen to reason."

Obeying some warm impulse, Zarik pressed her cheek against her mother-in-law's hand. But the old woman, as though startled by the unwonted caress, pushed Zarik gently away and went into the house.

Arriving early at the dispensary, Zarik decided to give the place a thorough cleaning before any patients had come in. She scrubbed the window-panes and floors with a brush till they were speckless and white, put the medicine chest in order and re-arranged the in-

struments in the cabinet. Now the dispensary could stand up to Dr. Bagrat's!

Zarik washed her hands carefully and put on her coat and cap. She no longer felt depressed. It was true, that old saying: "If your heart is troubled, put your house in order."

The door opened, and Aunt Sona sailed in without knocking. Her face, this time, wore no smile. It was not a social call she was making and so could allow herself to be cold and reserved. But Zarik was equal to the occasion. Without looking at Aunt Sona she busied herself arranging her shining instruments on the table—a purely tactical manoeuvre. This had the desired effect and Aunt Sona was soon replying humbly to all of Zarik's questions. And when Zarik began measuring her blood pressure, Aunt Sona, terrified of the rubber bulb and the strap wound round her arm, let out a series of piercing squeals.

But Zarik, as stern as Bagrat Sergeyevich himself, cut her short.

"That will do!" she snapped.

After that Aunt Sona was completely tamed and sat as quiet as a mouse. Her blood pressure was high but not alarmingly so.

"You can work," Zarik told her. "It will do you good."

"Ah, it's a grave illness I have," Aunt Sona moaned. "Do write what it's called on a piece of paper for me. I may be going to town to see a specialist."

"There's no need for that!"

"Well, write it out just the same."

Only when Zarik had complied and written the name of the disease and the readings of the blood-pressure apparatus on a sheet of paper did Aunt Sona leave. She went down the street, scrutinizing the note and shaking her head in self-pity.

After reception hours Zarik visited the kindergarten and day-nursery and then went to call on her bedridden patients.

Amo, the tractor-driver, was out.

"The Chairman came round this morning, and Amo went with him," said Amo's mother. "I tried to make him stay, showed your note to the Chairman, but neither one would listen."

"When it comes to draining that swamp you can never find him," Zarik fumed as she made her way to the village. "But when it's dragging sick people off to work he comes in person!"

Zarik was so angry that when she saw the Chairman's tall, stooping form just ahead, she forgot about trying to look important and ran to catch up with him.

"Uncle Galust!"

Accustomed to calling him this from her childhood, she had not been able to think of any more suitable form of address.

"How much longer is this to go on? Will you send that team out to drain the swamp or do you want all our people to come down with malaria?"

The Chairman walked ahead with the quick stride of the mountaineer, his head tilted forward and his lips pursed. Zarik, running to keep up with him, got no word in reply till they had entered his little office.

"I'm going to get in touch with the District Committee!" she finally brought out, all her arguments exhausted.

Galust placed his canvas brief-case on the desk and turning to face Zarik, looked at her with stern grey eyes.

"Go ahead," he said to her softly, almost whispering, "Go right ahead. Or else sit down right here in my place, and answer for the harvesting, for the building of the winter

barns, for repairing the school-house, for our highland plots, for everything. Go behind that desk and work!"

Zarik saw that the man was furious but it was not like her to give in so easily.

"I may be able to do your work for you, Uncle Galust," she said quietly. "But I fear you won't be able to do mine for me. So we're really just wasting our breath."

"You can do anything," Galust resumed in a fierce undertone. "You can even impede my work. You go around giving people sick-leave when every last man I have counts."

He thrust his fingers into the breast pocket of his tunic, and flung several crumpled pieces of paper on the desk.

"What's wrong with this?" Zarik said, smoothing out Amo's certificate. "The man had 40 degrees temperature last night, and you drag him off to the fields! He'll collapse with another bout of malaria in the mountains tomorrow, and then what'll you do? And all because of that same swamp that you refuse to drain! Is that what you call defending the interests of the state?"

Galust stood by the window, his back to her. Zarik smoothed out the second note. This

was the one she had unthinkingly given Aunt Sona that morning.

Zarik went up to the Chairman.

"I'll make Aunt Sona go back to work," she said. "As for the swamp, we must finish draining it this autumn."

"Wait till the end of harvesting," said the Chairman quietly but no longer in a whisper. "Do you think I don't understand?" He turned to Zarik and gave a short chuckle. "Look at that, will you! Sako Saroyan's daughter teaching me to look after the interests of the state!"

"What do you think!" Zarik let fall, and left the room, her head held high.

After midday Zarik set off for Avanlu again. This time she went on foot along a narrow rocky path that in places shot abruptly downward. As she climbed down the ledges and leaped from rock to rock she tried not to let her mind dwell on the things that were troubling her heart. To distract herself she turned her thoughts to her childhood.

Was it so long ago that, bare-footed, suntanned, she had run with other youngsters down this very path to the river below? Sometimes they would take longer hikes—to the

orchards of Avanlu. The old watchman there would treat the "hill children" with fragrant little melons, *shamams* as they were called, and cool clusters of grapes just off the vine. This had been only a short time ago, and already here she was, a doctor, the mother of a child, and, perhaps the first half of her life was already over. What if she were to die now, this very moment! How horrible the thought was, how impossible to accept! Poor Uncle Yegishe, he was young no longer, but he must find it just as horrible, just as unacceptable. And if he could be cured or, at least, have his life prolonged, if only by a few years, was it not a crime to neglect the possibility? But there was Bagrat Sergeyevich—could she risk his displeasure? He had done so much for her, had been ready always to help her. Why was she going to Avanlu? What could she be thinking of...?

But on she went uncontrollably, down the winding path, clutching at jutting rocks in steep places, oblivious, like everyone born and bred in those parts, of the burning sun overhead. Suddenly the path made a sharp turn, and the wide highway stretched before her.

The first passing car picked her up and brought her to Avanlu.

Bagrat Sergeyevich was engrossed in a book when Zarik, in her badly creased dress and looking more than ever like a girl in her early teens, entered his immaculate, carpet-hung room.

He was not surprised at her sudden appearance. Nothing ever surprised Dr. Bagrat.

"Go and wash," he said, looking up from his book. "Thin as a lath, dusty—makes me sick to look at you!"

But he was evidently longing to speak with someone, for, the book under his arm, he followed Zarik to the washstand.

"Look what they write here—got the Lord by the beard—something new against tuberculosis again!"

"But that's wonderful!" Zarik exclaimed. She had washed her face and was now winding her long plaits round her head.

"Yes, I know. But then one can write anything!"

"Well, you use new remedies yourself, don't you!"

"Certainly. Do you take me for a stick-in-the-mud?"

"There's nothing new against cancer, is there?" Zarik asked him, trying to steer the conversation closer to the object of her visit.

"Nothing efficacious, so far as I've gathered. The only way to deal with cancer is to operate, deeper and fuller."

"I think so, too," Zarik hastened to agree. "Take Uncle Yegishe. He is not so old or worn that an operation would not help. Might save his life."

There were several moments of silence. Then Bagrat Sergeyevich said in a changed voice:

"Was that why you came? Don't interfere with my affairs, Zarik!"

"I must interfere, I must. I have no choice!"

Zarik went up to Bagrat Sergeyevich and touched his shoulder lightly with her fingers. "Do you remember old Zolo dying? She was ninety, she wanted to die yet you sat over her with a syringe, you kept giving her oxygen. You fought for every minute of her life. Why?"

"I only did what every doctor would do," Bagrat Sergeyevich said quickly. "It was my duty!"

"Yes!" Zarik exclaimed. "And in three months or half a year, at best, you'll be called to Uncle Yegishe's death-bed. You'll be inject-

ing camphor just to prolong his life for another hour. And you'll be at peace—you'll have done your duty!"

Those last words—Zarik should never have said them. They wounded Bagrat Sergeyevich. He thought he even detected irony in them. That slip of a girl dared to criticize him, a man standing on an immeasurably higher level than herself!

"Don't lecture me!"

"I'm not lecturing you." Zarik's voice was firm. "I want you to persuade the old man to agree to the operation. You could do it easily."

"What nonsense!" Bagrat Sergeyevich cried. "Childish whims!"

"Very well," Zarik said. "I'll go to him myself."

"Hasn't it occurred to you that it would not look very well?"

"Yes," Zarik replied. "Yes, it has. I've thought a lot about it. But it'll be different if you come with me."

"I've never seen such nerve!" But Bagrat Sergeyevich went quickly to the hall-stand and jerked his cap off the peg.

Zarik hurried out after him. Dr. Bagrat's mother was standing in the tiny hall, her neck

craned and her eyes rounded with astonishment at what she had overheard. Her face, for once neither smiling nor friendly, was unrecognizable. She did not greet Zarik, and her eyes were stern and accusing as they followed her son.

Zarik and Bagrat Sergeyevich went down the street together in silence. Silently they stopped by the door of Vartan Arutsyan's house. As Zarik knocked, Bagrat Sergeyevich looked away indifferently.

Uncle Yegishe's son, Vartan, had been in the war and had marched across half Europe. He was accustomed to mingle with all sorts of people, and the two doctors coming in this way did not surprise or disconcert him. But his wife, Lusik, at once sensed that something was wrong. She bustled about, spreading a table-cloth on the table and setting out the refreshments. Then she slipped out for a moment to her mother-in-law's next door for a quick, whispered consultation.

Zarik sat at the table, looking expectantly at Bagrat Sergeyevich. The expression of displeasure and disgust never left his handsome face. He was drumming on the table with the tips of his fingers and seemed not to have the

slightest intention of saying anything at all. Zarik moved up closer to Vartan and began to speak. As she had supposed, Uncle Yegishe had not told his family anything about his illness.

Vartan's face clouded. His large, dark hands ran over the table-cloth in aimless confusion, picking up and dropping his knife, moving plates and glasses about.

"Is Father going to die?" he asked in a voice that had suddenly gone hoarse.

"Yes, unless he is operated on," Zarik said firmly.

Vartan turned to Bagrat Sergeyevich who nodded reluctantly.

Vartan's mother, a good-looking old woman with a frank, kindly face, stamped heavily into the room. She gave a dignified bow, sat down at the table, and looked searchingly at the doctors.

"Mother, how is Dad?" Vartan asked her awkwardly. "I haven't seen him today."

"Not bad, Son, he seems to be feeling a little better. He's been out in the garden. He asked me to make him an omelette and he's eaten some."

She spoke unhurriedly, but there was something strained, expectant in her manner.

"Let's go and have a talk with Dad," Vartan suggested.

Uncle Yegishe met them with a staid bow, but he did not attempt to smile. He was reclining on a high ottoman, propped up by pillows. On a little table beside him stood the now cold omelette, a dish of butter mixed with honey and some savoury flat cakes. He had hoped to vanquish his illness by taking rich, nourishing food. Zarik, who understood the naïve ruse, felt very sorry for him.

The army had taught Vartan determination and straightforwardness.

"See here, Dad, the doctors say you need an operation. I'll take you to town tomorrow."

The old man looked annoyed.

"Nothing for me to do there."

"The doctors insist that you must have treatment."

Vartan assumed a brisk, airy manner, like one discussing a mere trifle.

A silence ensued. This was so trying that Zarik felt she must say something just to break it. Suddenly Bagrat Sergeyevich rose to his feet. He pushed a chair up to the otto-

man, sat down, and laying his hands on his knees, began to speak. Clearly and simply he explained to Uncle Yegishe just what was the matter with him. Without exaggerating or ignoring the danger he described the course of the illness—from the appearance of a tiny tumour to the disintegration of the tissues.

"Get ready to go to town, my friend, you and I want to live!" he concluded, getting to his feet.

"He's carried it off splendidly!" thought Zarik. "I could never have done it so well!"

Uncle Yegishe lay slowly fingering his beads. His wife spoke up.

"Vartan!" Her son at once stood up and faced her. "Go to the Chairman and ask him to let you have the car in the morning. Lusik, mix the dough for some *lavashes*."

She gave her instructions calmly, but Zarik saw a new line of sorrow creasing the woman's brow.

Uncle Yegishe fidgeted, groaned and then sat up.

"We'll go, Yegishe," his wife said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "You know that we must."

Uncle Yegishe looked at her with a pitiful smile.

"Well ... all right ... if we must."

The old woman crossed over to Bagrat Sergeyevich.

"Thank you, doctor," she said. "Thank you from all of us!"

Bagrat Sergeyevich nodded briefly.

"You take good care of him, now. Especially after the operation."

Zarik and Bagrat Sergeyevich, walking side by side again, were as silent as before. Zarik, very tired, was thinking bitterly that no longer would she be a welcome visitor in the cosy little house by the dispensary. Just ahead, where the road forked, their ways would part, Bagrat Sergeyevich taking the turn to his own house, and she, Zarik, going along the highway, hoping to get a lift in a passing car. But Zarik's heart was light: she had done her duty.

A group of people appeared from where the road forked, the Party secretary of the Avanlu farm among them. On seeing Zarik and Bagrat Sergeyevich, he raised his hand and hastened his step. Bagrat Sergeyevich, who had been about to turn the corner, stopped, and Zarik, thinking that the secretary's gesture of greeting had nothing to do with her, paused

to say good-bye to him. But the short swarthy-faced secretary, though nodding deferentially to Bagrat Sergeyevich, addressed Zarik:

"You mustn't take offence, doctor. I'm sorry about the way things were last time I saw you. Let's forget about it. We here have decided to go out to drain that swamp while you in Zarevshan are harvesting. We'll put on record the number of hours our men work and then you people can do an equal amount of work later. It will all be fair and square."

"We're challenging Zarevshan!" grinned a young man in a fuzzy Caucasian fur cap.

"Of course!" Zarik was eager. "That's a good idea! Zarevshan won't let you down. We are to have a tractor, too."

Everyone started talking at once, and Bagrat Sergeyevich who had stopped so inopportunely, felt that it was rather ridiculous of him to be standing there like that, a stranger to the general enthusiasm.

"Look here, Gerasim," he was in a torment to find something to say. "Your wife was asking me for those pills the other day. Tell her I've got them ready for her."

The secretary put his hand to his heart in gratitude, and Bagrat Sergeyevich, who

had had the last word after all, went off with unhurried step.

"That's all right with me!" was Zarik's thought. "I'm not proud, I'll come to see you yet, Dr. Bagrat Sergeyevich!"

As though feeling her glance, Bagrat Sergeyevich turned, smiled mockingly at her and doffed his cap with an affected dramatic gesture.

Zarik looked at him gravely and pensively. No, Bagrat Sergeyevich, she was thinking, you are mistaken, your superior pose has not come off, it simply has not!

Pulling his cap down sharply over his ears, Dr. Bagrat quickened his step. His shoulders sagged.

"Come with us, Zarik," said the man in the fuzzy cap. "Our team's going to the swamp now. We'll give you a lift. You can ride in the cab with the driver."

Shading his eyes with his hand, he looked up at the sky. "We still have time to work another three hours or so today."

"Yes," agreed the secretary. "The days are longer now."

And Zarik went with them down the wide, sunlit village street.

DIFFICULT MEETING

Seda Alexandrovna watched them coming toward her up the lane of roses, the short, boyishly slender man and the sturdy, sun-tanned little girl with the round, brown eyes.

"It never even enters his head... perhaps, because Marochka looks rather younger than her age? What if I were to come straight out and tell him: 'It's your child....'" And because this was such an easy thing to do, Seda Alexandrovna felt frightened, the way one feels when one looks down from the top of a very tall house.

"There's Mummy," Marochka said. "Will you tell her the fairy-tale about the three roses, too?"

"It's a legend!" amended Karo Leonovich. "And I dare say your mummy knows it."

Seda Alexandrovna was not sure she did but let the remark pass. The time was long past when it had seemed to her so all-important to show that she knew that legend, and how refrigerators work, and the origin of the Milky Way, and the wedding rites of the Polynesians, and heaven knows what else.

"Why am I angry?" Seda Alexandrovna asked herself sadly. "What do I expect? That he recognize Marochka? But is that possible?"

She walked a little ahead of Karo Leonovich and Marochka, showing her visitor around the farm like a discoverer leading his fellows to new lands. Dark green bushes studded with white roses bordered both sides of the wide lane.

"Have you seen Plot One?" Seda Alexandrovna asked.

"Oh, yes, Marochka showed me all the sights."

"It's ornamental plants there mostly. You're going to see our best achievements now."

It would have been hard to say exactly where but all at once the rose lane gave way

to a woody path, slippery with pine needles. The forest seemed impenetrable, pine trees standing in a tall wall, but soon a sunlit clearing showed between the trunks. At the edge of the forest belt, as even and perfect as if it had been cut along a dotted line, the flower field began.

Seda Alexandrovna, aware of the effect produced on visitors by this great tract of land carpeted with flowers suddenly bursting into view, usually stepped aside from the path when she had brought them close to the end of the forest.

"Plot Three is our window display. There we can show things off to advantage," she would say to her colleagues.

The flowers in the field were arranged according to colour and formed a striking pattern. They trailed over the ground, rose higher than a man, grew in thick clusters and beds shaped like nosegays and baskets.

"Fantastic!" Karo Leonovich burst out. "Where did you get those gladioluses? What a wealth of colour! Grow those flowers in the sea, and you'll have enough dye to stain the world!"

"They don't leave stains," Marochka was

quick to explain. She was accustomed to flowers and regarded them indifferently.

"Wh-what's this? Wh-what's this, I ask you?!" someone was shouting in angry, gasping tones, quite close at hand.

Marochka darted forward, pulling Karo Leonovich along and Seda Alexandrovna hastened after them.

At a bend in the road stood a stout, squat old man clutching a large-headed lad by the hem of his shirt. Beside them, his hands in the pockets of his once white trousers, stood a flaxen-haired youth, his face burnt crimson by the sun.

The lad guiltily held in his hands the broken stalk of a gladiolus, almost as tall as himself.

"He's broken it!" the old man exclaimed triumphantly when Seda Alexandrovna drew near. "There!"

Seeing these new witnesses the lad tried to break free, but without success. Marochka was already at his side, calmly looking him over.

"You're a new boy, aren't you?" And though the boy made no reply, she turned to her mother saying, "He's a new boy, Mummy, he's just come today!"

"I wish you'd let go of him, Grigory Yefre-

movich," Seda Alexandrovna said frowning, "you don't think he'll vanish, do you?"

"All right, I'll let him go!" Grigory Yefremovich cried, getting a still tighter hold on the boy's shirt. "But, perhaps, you haven't seen just what he's done!"

"Yes, I have. But we can't kill him for it, can we?"

The broken flower was one of the best specimens of a new variety and they had intended to set it aside for seed.

"We call this variety 'Northern Light,' " she explained and taking the firm stalk with its large blossoms from the boy's hand, she twirled it in the air.

"I didn't know!" the little captive cried out in despair. "I thought they were just growing."

"I suppose you thought they were field flowers," Grigory Yefremovich said with unconcealed irony, "and wanted to pick an armful?"

"He may very well be telling the truth, you know," Karo Leonovich interposed. "I was rather stunned myself, when I suddenly came upon these gorgeous flowers in the middle of the forest."

"Aha!" Grigory Yefremovich brought forth

exultantly. He turned to Seda Alexandrovna: "What did I tell you! What do I keep telling you, Comrade Director, always, daily and hourly? We must have some sort of barrier, a fence or something. We can't allow our farm to be turned into a playground for the Pioneers."

In the meantime Marochka, determined and tugging hard, had been extricating the boy's shirt bit by bit from Grigory Yefremovich's fist.

"The supper bell's been rung already at camp. I'll take him there, shall I, Mummy?" And turning to Karo Leonovich, she said in a quite different, pleading tone: "Did you just promise that, or will you really come to our campfire tonight?"

"I never 'just promise' anything. I'll come if they really want me."

"Oh, they do, they do!" Marochka hurried to assure him. "Then I'll tell Seryozha you'll come, may I?"

"And who is Seryozha?"

"Their senior Pioneer leader," Seda Alexandrovna answered, before Marochka could. She gave the little girl a slight push. "Run along, dear."

Grigory Yefremovich grumbled on:

"Of course, if we pat them on the heads no matter what they do— You've broken a valuable plant, you dear child, run and have your supper. Say what you will, I refuse to understand or recognize this modern upbringing."

"Modern upbringing, do you call it?" Karo Leonovich interrupted. "You may remember that Makarenko, the outstanding educator of our times, was definitely in favour of physical punishment."

The sun-singed youth, who had been quietly watching the scene, laughed noisily.

"What's so funny, young man?" Karo Leonovich said screwing up his eyes. "I am perfectly serious. In theory as well as in practice—"

"Go tell that to someone else!" The youth broke in unceremoniously. "I was brought up in a colony for homeless waifs, myself. It's all plain rubbish, what you say!"

"Just a moment, just a moment..." and Karo Leonovich drew close to the young man. "Don't be so crude. I only brought up a point of view Makarenko had voiced. However, pardon me, but what year did you say you were with the colony?"

"Oh, well, I know nothing about anyone's views," the youth persisted. "But if there was one thing we didn't have it was physical punishment. I was in a home near Moscow and the director was a pupil of Makarenko's. Of course, Makarenko himself was not there, that was before my time."

"Aha! There you are!"

Karo Leonovich was jubilant.

Seda Alexandrovna, who had been following the conversation closely, now said to the bookkeeper:

"Is the bill drawn up?"

"I'll have it ready for you tomorrow morning," Grigory Yefremovich replied dryly. "Comrade Korotkov here," and he indicated the sun-singed youth with a nod, "has made his selection. Oh, and Sekoyan's asked if you could look into the hot-house."

In the hot-house, a new phlox, a double. two-coloured variety, was on display. It had blossomed out that morning, but Sekoyan, the farm's senior research worker, had decided to hold a public exhibition after working hours. And now the staff and the young horticulturists doing practice on the farm had already gathered there.

Armo Sekoyan, impassive and dignified, was standing apart from the rest and twisting a button on his blue smock. He had done his job. Now it was for the others to judge. But his heart was fluttering in his breast, for like any vain human, he liked his work to be appreciated. People made way for Seda Alexandrovna, who walked swiftly to the plant and examined it as carefully and closely as a woman admiring a new frock at a dress-maker's.

"Very effective," she brought out at last approvingly. "Although I don't quite see them in big numbers. Might be a bit gaudy."

She looked the plant over once more and repeated in satisfied tones, "It *is* effective!" Then she turned to her visitors as if inviting them to admire it and express their opinion.

"Not bad. Quite an eyeful!" Korotkov said earnestly, smiling at the girl-students with whom he had already made friends.

This brought him a withering glance from Armo Sekoyan who felt that the smiles, the admiration of the girls, public esteem—all, all of it belonged to him alone. Tomorrow he would go back to his work again, a garrulous, bustling, inconspicuous little man. Tomorrow

he would want none of this, but today was *his* day!

"Duration of florescence—June to September," he said loftily.

"Well," Karo Leonovich echoed, "that's usual with phlox, I believe."

He stepped up close to the flower and inspected the base of its thick stem.

"I see. Cyanea family.... Country of origin —North America. If I'm not mistaken, the number of species comes to about forty-five?"

Armo Sekoyan snatched the bait eagerly.

"Sixty!" he said impressively. "Sixty! What's more, twenty of them have been grown in the Soviet Union, and three of those on this very farm."

"By Armo Sekoyan," Seda Alexandrovna put in adroitly.

The senior research worker modestly dropped his eyes. His face was wreathed in smiles.

"Did you use crossing or vegetative hybridization?"

And, disappointing Sekoyan who had been inspired to reply, Karo Leonovich glanced at his listeners merrily. "Can any of you people tell me when, in the history of botany, mention

was first made of man changing the forms of plants?"

Seda Alexandrovna turned away, annoyed. She knew that no one would reply to the question. More than that, she knew that there could be no reply.

"Comrade Sekoyan," she said with pointed emphasis, ignoring Karo Leonovich, "is the plant frost-hardy?"

But this did not help. The employees, the students, and Korotkov all moved away from Sekoyan and the double phlox, drawn by such alluring words, as "Chaldea's cuneiform characters," "the hanging gardens of Semiramis," "Empress Cleopatra."

"And you, botanists, do you know what the word 'carat' means?" Karo Leonovich went on in his breezy voice.

"A unit of weight for precious stones?" one of the students ventured in the hesitant tones of a schoolgirl. "But what has it got to do with botany?"

"O-oh, then you don't know. Well, a carat is nothing more nor less than the seed of the ordinary pod. Haven't you ever tasted the so-called sweet-horn? Its seeds served jewelers

as a measure of weight and were called carats."

"Oh, well," thought Seda Alexandrovna. "Granted he's brilliant and enjoys this glamour, why can't he see that he's making another suffer? I should think anyone could!"

But they did not see it, none of them, except herself.

Karo Leonovich left the hot-house, drawing his entranced audience after him.

Armo Sekoyan, ruffled and sullen, stood studying a young shoot with exaggerated attention. It was imperative, she thought, for her to say a few encouraging words to him.

"I think it will look beautiful in big numbers, too. Just what we want for city parks and embankments."

Trying hard to be objective, Armo Sekoyan said in a voice that quivered with emotion:

"A man of erudition. Gives one great pleasure to listen to him. Especially those excursions into history. Is he going to work here?"

"Don't be silly!" Seda Alexandrovna waved her hand impatiently. "He's not even a botanist. He's an economist."

The sky was fast growing dark. A coolness came from the forest. Voices, muffled by the

distance, and heavy, thumping sounds came from afar. A last game of volley-ball was being played in camp.

"I wish I were one of those young girls jumping near the net there," thought Seda Alexandrovna. "No mistakes made yet, no responsibility. . . ."

She sat down on a low stool under a large bush, hugging her knees with her arms. The day had not been easy. Not that she would have changed places with anyone! Not even to be young again would she give up her place in life, her work and, above all, Marochka.

Once she had dreamed of a son. A lovely, perfect child. She would have shown him proudly to the man. "Yes, this is your son," she would say, calmly and with pride. "But you have no rights to him. None." Thus had she planned to revenge herself for the wrong that had been done her, for her loneliness and her great and unrequitted love.

A flat-nosed little girl had been born to her, by no means a perfect child, stubborn and full of whims. But nevertheless, Marochka, eager, truthful, loving, was the dearest, most precious thing on earth. All that was best in life belonged to her. Was Seda Alexandrovna justi-

fied in depriving her of her father because of old hurts?

She suddenly heard a voice with a ring of conviction in it saying to her:

"Seda Alexandrovna, I can well understand your indignation. You're perfectly right!"

"Is that you, Seryozha?" Seda Alexandrovna asked, peering into the darkness.

"Yes, it's me," the camp Pioneer leader replied. "I've been looking for you all over the place. We have not justified your confidence in us. But I give you my word that no such disgraceful incident will ever occur again."

"Are you speaking about the boy who plucked our gladiolus? I'm sure he meant no harm. So don't let it worry you."

"No, it's a question of principle."

Seryozha was flustered.

"You trusted us, we had the run of the place, all the gates were open."

"What gates? There aren't any."

"So much the worse for us! I know you must be angry at heart, whatever you say. We've just had the question up for discussion and decided to help you on the farm for three days. We want to repair the wrong that's been done."

"Oh! That might interest me if you really meant it. What would you like to do?"

"Everything. Dig soil, carry rocks, water plants. . . ."

"That suits me!" laughed Seda Alexandrovna. "Joking aside, Seryozha, they'll be bringing the rooting machine over on Monday, and that's when we can really keep your boys and girls busy."

"There's no question of any jokes! I'll send you the best kids we have! They'll do a good job, I promise you. Well, I'll be running along. Marochka's got round that professor and he's going to give us a talk. We're going to have a really big fire! Perhaps you'd like to come, too?"

"I may. Was it Marochka who told you he was a professor?"

Seryozha made no reply. He vanished in the darkness just as swiftly and soundlessly as he had appeared.

Seda Alexandrovna walked slowly along the dark path. Then the forest embraced her, and in the shadows she moved from pine to pine till the flames of the huge fire ahead flared before her eyes.

The fire had been laid in the middle of an

open glade. Seda Alexandrovna leaned against a tree's broad, warm trunk, careful not to spoil her dress with the resin.

She had a good view of the fire and the children's flame-lit faces. Nearly all were seated, with the exception of a few little ones who just could not get settled. Marochka was bustling about near them. She shouted directions to the boys who were rolling a big log up to the fire, lifted tots on to it, set right their clothes and finally seated herself on the edge of the log, her arms folded solemnly in her lap.

"With what confidence she carries herself here!" Seda Alexandrovna smiled. But was there a place on earth where Marochka would carry herself differently! She always found someone to chaperon and care for, and in consequence she lorded it over everyone.

Seda Alexandrovna could not long remain unseen. Marochka got busy again, clearing a place for her. Karo Leonovich smiled his boyish smile which showed his beautiful teeth. But Seda Alexandrovna cut short her daughter's zeal with an impatient gesture, nodded slightly at her guest and remained by the pine-tree.

Seryozha stepped in front of the fire and announced that they would hear a talk by Karo

Leonovich Sarkisyan, scholar and expert on economics. Seda Alexandrovna listened attentively. Seryozha had not called him professor; that must have been the vainglorious Marochka's invention!

Karo Leonovich came up to the fire, lifting a hand in greeting or, perhaps, to hush the children's generous applause.

"I should like to share with you my impressions of a trip to the countries of the Middle East. I was there last summer with a delegation of this republic."

He turned his head and screwing up his eyes a little, glanced at Seda Alexandrovna.

"Oh, so that's how it was!" thought she. "You were a delegation member, were you! That is supposed to be an indication of worldly success!"

Karo Leonovich began his story with an amusing incident. The delegation members were crossing a desert in motor cars. When they came to an oasis they had to stop beside a well because two of the women delegates —a famous stage actress and a young collective farmer, a Heroine of Labour—wanted to dust off their clothes and to wash up. The men drove on a little, then stopped to wait for them.

They waited an hour, two hours, but the two women did not appear, and the men, seriously worried now, drove back. They were greeted by a fantastic sight. A huge herd of camels, lured from the desert by the smell of water, had surrounded the well so closely that the two women were virtually imprisoned. They were forced to draw pail after pail of water, they were exhausted and despairing, but they could not escape, for the thirst of a herd of camels is not easily slaked.

The children laughed. Seda Alexandrovna watched Marochka. The little girl had strained forward. Admiration was written all over her round tanned face. Sometimes she would glance back in triumph to see if everyone was listening and interested, and, pleased and happy, turn her gaze again to the speaker.

"That's only to be expected," thought Seda Alexandrovna bitterly. "He's a good speaker. But why, why after so many years of complete and wordless separation has he come here?"

Seda Alexandrovna felt in her pocket for his crumpled letter. It was brief and bore no words of address:

"While resting in a sanatorium, I learned, quite by accident, that Seda Karayan lives and

works in the neighbourhood. Ignoring the golden rule not to permit the present to invade the fragile realms of the past, I made up my mind to call up again the dawn of my misty youth. By visiting the famed flower farm, I lay obligations on no one. . . ."

The fragile realms of the past! Seda Alexandrovna recalled how she had given birth to Marochka in the small hospital of the town she scarcely knew. Her neighbour in the ward was a young woman like herself. This woman's relatives called on her day and night, they showered her with flowers, letters, parcels. They were preparing a wonderful welcome for her red-faced, lusty-voiced baby. But Marochka who was dark and fluffy and quiet and had curly ringlets of black hair from the day she was born had gladdened no one except her mother; no one had written notes asking if she were doing well, no one had waited for her by the hospital door.

"But what is it I want of him?" Seda Alexandrovna asked herself again and again. "How could he know about the child's existence? It is not my own wounds I must think about now, nor my personal accounts that I must square."

The fire was burning itself out. A heap of red-hot embers gleamed in the darkness.

Karo Leonovich, his glance straying from one child to another, went on speaking. His voice, though not loud, was clear and distinct.

"It happened at one of the smaller Turkish railway stations when the delegation was on its way home. Dawn was just breaking, it was stuffy in the train, sleep wouldn't come, and several of us went out for a breath of air to the carriage door. The station was deserted, and what a station it was! A few clay huts, several twisted, dusty trees, and the scorched steppe as far as the eye could see. We were about to go back to our compartments when we saw a little boy plodding alongside the train and lurching from side to side like a drunk. Not until he had come closer did we realize that the boy was asleep. He slept as he walked! Clutched in his hands were some large, yellow cucumbers. He had not the strength to hawk his wares. All he wanted was sleep. On and on he trudged along the sandy embankment, stumbling and reeling at every step. We called to him, but the boy was too overcome by sleep to grasp what was wanted

of him. When it dawned on him that he might be able to sell his cucumbers, he began to tremble with excitement. We gave him some money and said, 'Go home to bed, we don't want anything.' But the boy fumbled feverishly in his jacket for the yellow, overripe cucumbers, and even when the train moved off he kept running after it, holding them out to us."

"And we here were fast asleep when it happened!" said Marochka, loudly and sorrowfully.

"Yes," agreed Karo Leonovich, "you were asleep. It made me happy, knowing that the children of the Soviet land were peacefully asleep at that hour."

A bell rang sharply in camp, and at once Seryozha appeared beside Karo Leonovich.

"No! No! We want to hear more!" the children cried. "Can't we stay just a little while? Ten minutes! One minute!"

"Discipline's discipline," said Seryozha curtly. "Monitors, put out the fire! The rest, to your rooms!"

There was no disobeying these brusque orders!

Seda Alexandrovna stepped out on to the narrow path, lit by the newly risen moon, and walked towards Karo Leonovich and Marochka.

Marochka was excited.

"Why didn't you take him with you?" she demanded, clutching Karo Leonovich's hand. "He must have been hungry. You should have taken him with you on the train!"

"But he may not have cared to come with us," Karo Leonovich gravely replied. "Perhaps his parents were at that station."

"His parents!" Marochka gave a scornful snort. "What sort of parents are they, sending their children out to sell cucumbers! What are parents for if they can't bring up their children properly!"

"Come, let's have some tea," said Seda Alexandrovna quickly. "Where's that sun-tanned young man? He was somewhere around. I wanted to invite him to tea."

"He's already been invited," the all-knowing Marochka informed her. "By Irochka. The girls have raspberry jam for tea today."

"Ah, yes," laughed Karo Leonovich. "Raspberry jam plus the sweet age of twenty! I'm past such pleasures, I'm afraid!"

"We have cherry jam. Do you really like raspberry jam best? We have cake, too."

"Oh, there's no resisting cake!

To-your-feet,
It's-a-treat,
Let's-go-eat
Our-cake!

Marochka caught up the gay tune and, hand in hand, they swung down the park lane, timing their steps to the rhythm.

To-your-feet,
It's-a-treat,
Let's-go-eat
Our-cake!

Seda Alexandrovna followed close on their heels. She was the first to hear Seryozha's quick steps behind her.

"Comrade Sarkisyan," said he breathlessly, "I . . . that is, we . . . haven't had time to thank you for your wonderful lecture. On behalf of our camp—"

"In the first place, it wasn't a lecture," Karo Leonovich interrupted. "And in the second, I need no thanks other than the children's evi-

dent enjoyment. You broke off the talk most opportunely, I must say."

Seryozha was confused.

"We're very strict about keeping regular hours," he explained, trying to justify himself. "I'm responsible for it, you see."

"Ah, so you're responsible! Well, that's different. Nothing more to be said."

And Karo Leonovich and Marochka marched off down the lane again.

To-your-feet,
It's-a-treat,
Let's-go-eat
Our-cake!

"Why were you so sharp with him?" Seda Alexandrovna asked in an undertone when they had gone a little way and were beyond earshot of the much distressed Seryozha.

"I hate prigs!" Karo Leonovich retorted. He seemed to have been expecting her question. "There must be an intelligent approach to a thing like discipline: decide first which is more important—for the children to go to bed at a fixed hour, or to break the rules for once, give them a few extra moments in which to learn

something new. Broadening their horizon and helping them work out an outlook on life can only do them good. But he is responsible, you see, and is bent on observing the rules as mechanically as a robot! Tell me frankly, am I right or not?"

"As far as I remember you are always right. Every argument I ever had with you ended with my owing you two kopeks forfeit."

Seda Alexandrovna had no wish just then to start an altercation. It was so pleasant to be walking there, the three of them, feeling that they were a "family"—something she had never experienced before. She felt it even more strongly later when they sat together on the veranda of the little house, whose walls were overgrown with climbers. Grey butterflies spun round the lamp on the table. The china tinkled softly. Marochka chattered on without stopping, while Seda Alexandrovna sat silent and pensive.

"I'm very much like my daddy," she suddenly heard Marochka say. "My daddy hated having his pictures taken, and so do I. I always look so foolish and pop-eyed. That's why when he was killed in the war we had no pictures of his left at all. Only

one, and even in that one he has his back to us."

"Marochka, wash and go to bed," Seda Alexandrovna broke in.

"Oh, Mummy darling, just one more minute!"

"Don't make me say the same thing twice."

Marochka got up reluctantly and went to her room. She pottered about there for a time, then called, "Good night!" and was still.

"The air here is wonderful!" Karo Leonovich said in low tones. "Trees, flowers, grass. It actually makes me dizzy. You must be used to it, I suppose."

"Yes, I'm used to it."

"I admit I never expected to find the farm so well run. Did you really have nothing at all here to begin with?"

"Well, not exactly."

Seda Alexandrovna closed her eyes for a moment to bring up a picture of the land as it had looked then, so many years ago. The park covered an area of two hectares. Where the rose lane now blossomed there was a ditch grown over with clinging shrubs. The war was on. The farm staff—five women—the director,

one research worker and three labour hands, felled the trees and rooted up the stumps by themselves. They planted potatoes and beets in the flower beds. Marochka was then a tiny baby. They took her to the forest with them, spread out a blanket on the ground, and there she would play with chips of wood and spruce cones.

"Well, we've met again, haven't we, after so many years!" said Karo Leonovich. "You must be pleased with your life? You have achieved what you always wanted."

"And what was it I always wanted?"

"Why, a director's post, independence! You always had it in you—vanity, the ambition to rule over others."

"Me?"

Seda Alexandrovna remembered the submissive, loving young girl she had been. "And you saw it even then?"

"Oh, Seda!" He rose from his chair. "Let's not stir up the past. It would hardly be flattering to you."

"To me?" Seda Alexandrovna repeated bitterly. "You can say that!"

"Yes, I can," he said slowly, peering at her with cold, narrowed eyes. "I can, considering

your child's age: You adjusted yourself rather quickly!"

"It all rests with me!" thought Seda Alexandrovna. How easily she could say to him:

"Are you blind? Look at her! She has your mouth, your manner of squinting her eyes, your hands."

She rose.

"It's late. I'll see you to your room."

The guest room, the office and the accountant's room, were located in another house, small and overgrown with climbers like its neighbour. Seda Alexandrovna knocked softly —there was no response. She pushed open the door, and they entered a neat little room. The ever-present bunch of flowers stood on a small table between the two beds.

"Comrade Korotkov must still be at his tea party," remarked Seda Alexandrovna.

"Did I offend you, Seda? Forgive me!"

"Oh, what has changed you so? You now admit that you are in the wrong sometimes, do you? Don't worry. You haven't offended me in the least."

"Do you know when I look at you it seems strange that so many years have passed! You are as beautiful as ever."

"Yes!" Seda Alexandrovna interrupted. "Yes, I know! I remember. I'm more than beautiful. Good night!"

She walked out swiftly, filled with a sense of acute disappointment in herself.

Why had she put on her best dress? Why had she striven all day to seem prettier, more attractive than usual? Had she hoped—? One must be honest with oneself. Yes, she had hoped for happiness like any other woman. "Husband"—how much the word held for even the most independent, the strongest of women! If she could only feel that Karo was as dear to her as ever, that she needed him as once she had. But she did not.

How proud she had been of him, how she had admired him in their first years together. With what scornful pity she had treated people whose opinion of him differed from her own. And there had been many such. Wherever he had worked he had always been compelled to repel this or that person's attempts to wound his pride or curb his authority and influence, to enter into hostile and complicated relations with his chiefs and fellow workers.

"Life is a struggle, little girl," he would explain to her. She had always sided with

him—indignant and furious, hating his antagonists.

How well she saw, now that she had years of personal experience behind her, that the big-sounding word "struggle" bore no relation to the squabbles this man had been such an adept at starting. But even when time had little by little begun to rob her of her illusions, her love for him had forced her to forgive him and find excuses for him.

They had all been young then—Karo and she, then a student at the agricultural institute, and the gay, reckless Gagik Alimyan, their one close friend. They had had great expectations and a first big success. A book on economic geography Karo and Gagik had written together was soon to appear in print. Gagik had cleverly designed and drawn the diagrams, Karo had arranged the material with his usual brilliance. It would have been difficult to say which of the two had done more, whose contribution had been the greater. The book cover was to bear their names in alphabetical order: "G. Alimyan and K. Sarkisyan."

After the book was sent to the printing-shop, Gagik seemed to lose all interest in it. New

plans and projects were born in his head. Without waiting for the book to appear he rushed off somewhere on another project.

Karo went regularly to the printing-shop. On one or two occasions he asked Seda to get together a cold snack, which he would then take along with him together with some wine for the workmen who were setting up the book.

"I like to give the people there a little encouragement, show them a bit of attention," he would explain.

At the very last moment before the final printing, Karo reversed the order of the names ensuring equal rights to both authors. Anyone the least bit versed in these matters could now understand that the principal part of the work belonged to K. Sarkisyan whose name on the cover preceded that of G. Alimyan.

Karo brought home a first copy. Seda paid no attention to the order of the names. She gave a squeal of delight and began dancing round the room. Then he said:

"Look at the cover."

She was slow to understand.

"Look at the order of the names."

"Oh, how awful!" Seda exclaimed. "How did it happen?"

"It was my idea."

He was securely confident of her complete subordination.

"Your idea?" She was startled. "But why? And how can you ever face Gagik now?"

"My discomfort may last an hour but the book will remain."

"I see! And what if Gagik had done it?"

"Oh, well," he said with a chuckle, "you know that classical saying: 'What Jupiter may, the bull may not.' "

"But it's a vile thing to do!"

"Only fair. I did more work."

"No. It was vile."

Without a word he began to pack his bag. Seda could not believe that he was leaving, she could not imagine life without him. She was now ashamed to recall how she had tried to snatch the bag from him, how she had implored him to stay, to talk it over.

"Where criticism begins there love ends," he told her in farewell.

It was torment, too, to remember with what agony she had waited for him, how tensely, nervously she had listened to every rustle behind the door. She never left the house, afraid that he might come and not find her in. Every

time the telephone rang she felt a thrill of anguish in her heart.

Then she learned that she would have a child. This was her triumph, her revenge, her one hope. "You deserted me, but I am carrying your child. I will bring it up all by myself, and then you'll understand how brave I was, how staunch."

But life was difficult.

Seda did not pass her final examinations as had been expected of her, and the hope of remaining with the institute for post-graduate work withered. Instead, she was appointed to the Gulikend flower farm.

"I don't even want him to know where I am," Seda thought although Karo had made no attempts to see her.

She had a glimpse of him once, in the street, during the war, when she had come to town on one of her business trips. He was wearing a military coat, he had a stubby growth of beard, and was limping, leaning heavily, on a stick for support. "He's wounded," she thought with a pang. Shortly after, she learned from friends that he had not even been called up. He was working as consultant in some militarized institution and

limped because of a catarrhal failing which most people questioned.

"But how can he!" Seda thought. "Has he no one to tell him how disgraceful it is?"

There was someone sitting on the steps of the little porch. Seda Alexandrovna's eyes, accustomed to the darkness, made out the white linen jacket and cap of Grigory Yefremovich.

"Can't sleep," he said.

"Would you like some tea?"

Seda Alexandrovna sat down on the step below him.

"No, no tea," replied Grigory Yefremovich. "What I want to know is this—are we going to take the children to school in the horse cart again?"

"If we buy a second car, we'll take them in that."

The question's inopportuneness did not surprise Seda Alexandrovna. In the years they had worked together she had grown accustomed to the old book-keeper's little oddities.

"And Marochka?" he asked.

"And Marochka, too, like everyone else. Why?"

"She's such a gifted child!" Grigory Yefremovich's voice was tinged with bitterness. "She ought to be going to a school in town."

"The Gulikend school is good enough for any child."

"Seda, my child," the old man pursued, "it's true for the moment. But later? Marochka is growing up."

"He knows!" Seda Alexandrovna concluded, and at once her speech took on its defensive tone of careless irony.

"She's growing up, and we're growing old. But nothing will change, Grigory Yefremovich."

"Not in summer, no," the old man went on, unabashed. "But what about winter? No theatres, no amusements—only the forest and the wind howling. Marochka ought to be taking piano lessons."

"What am I to do, dear Grigory Yefremovich?" asked Seda Alexandrovna softly.

"My dearest child, there must be logic in everything. You are young, beautiful. And always alone. Home is a wonderful thing. You'd have help, too."

"Oh, Grigory Yefremovich! We made out during the war when I couldn't even buy su-

gar for the baby. We got over the most difficult years. I don't need help from anyone now."

"Still, I'd give it another thought if I were you. You mustn't be unfair to your child."

"I—unfair to her?" Seda Alexandrovna flared up. "Why, does she want for anything? She shall have everything, everything!"

"You're too proud," said Grigory Yefremovich sternly, rising to go. "Of course, it's your right. But—it's not good."

He stood there a few moments, waiting, but she did not reply, and he stamped off homewards.

It was warm and stuffy indoors after the freshness of the night. Seda Alexandrovna flung off her dress, tossing it to the floor, kicked the slippers off her feet and lay on her bed for a long time, sleepless, listening to Marochka's soft breathing.

The sun comes late to the Gulikend flower farm. It first appears on the peaks of the mountains. Then a long ray drops into the gorge—and all at once the morning is there.

"No, it's not at all what you need," Seda Alexandrovna was saying. "Not at all! Everything will have to be changed."

Looking over some papers, clipped together with a fastener, she walked ahead down the park lane, Grigory Yefremovich and the youthful Comrade Korotkov obediently following.

This was the first responsible assignment in his life, and Korotkov had chosen the plants carefully and critically, selecting the most beautiful ones, and he now suspected a catch in the director's words. And the book-keeper who had been such a help all along, now obviously avoided his gaze.

Seda Alexandrovna seated herself on a small bench under a tall bush. She looked at Korotkov and shook her curly head.

"You don't want those gladioluses. I understand you need decorative plants for a steppe canal, right? More greenery and as fast as it can grow. We'll give you our ornamental barberry and this perennial daisy—look, what a beauty!" And Seda Alexandrovna drew towards herself a branch covered with flowers. "Then you can have some phlox, white, pink and crimson. They're easy to grow. You'll have a lovely colour scheme: green, white and deep red. And some blue periwinkle for a border. And look what you have chosen." She ripped the bill carelessly. "Roses, gladioluses—you'll

have endless trouble with them, and nothing really striking to show for it! You've got all that new land to cover, I know."

"New land, that's so..." mumbled Korotkov. He could not bring himself to part so soon with his dream. He saw a flower with pointed, twisted petals, and beyond it, two-coloured balls which swayed in the breeze and looked like puffy Chinese paper toys.

"Yes, they are lovely!" Seda Alexandrovna said, catching the direction of his gaze. "But don't lose sight of the fact that you'll have to dig them up for the winter and plant them in special soil and even then you can't be certain they will bloom at all the first year."

She rose, put her arm through the youth's and led him off, without so much as a look at Grigory Yefremovich who with a stony face sat down on the bench and picked up the torn bill.

"He'll never resist her now!" came Karo Leonovich's breezy voice. He stood there and with a smile watched Seda Alexandrovna lead Korotkov away.

"She's sure to insist on her own," he repeated, seating himself beside Grigory Yefremovich. "Neither you with all your book-keeper's

implacability nor that determined whipper-snapper there can do anything about it!"

"Can *you*?" Grigory Yefremovich returned caustically, and as though frightened of what his words might reveal, he added, "She always does as she pleases."

He jumped up suddenly.

"Feast your eyes on that, if you please! They walk around here as though the place belonged to them! Can't they keep to their own grounds! The air's just as good. It'd be better for them, and less trouble for us."

A sun-tanned little chap wearing nothing but his shorts and two little girls in summer frocks and bows in their hair came toward the bench.

"Uncle Grigor, where's Marochka?"

"I don't know, I haven't seen her. What do you want Marochka for? She's too old for you. Go back to camp—see, they're chasing a ball around over there. Very thrilling! Run along."

"We want Marochka," the little boy insisted stubbornly, and the bows in the little girls' heads bobbed in agreement.

"We want Marochka."

Seda Alexandrovna was hurrying toward them.

"Grigory Yefremovich, be a dear, draw up a new bill right away, will you?"

"Well, well!" Grigory Yefremovich said. "I don't suppose you care that the sum is decreased by nearly thirty per cent. And it's no way of doing business, bringing personal charm into play. At this rate, we'll never fulfil the plan, you and I."

"Personal charm indeed! What are you talking about, Grigory Yefremovich. Why, he's young enough to be my son. Please attend to the bill. He's leaving in two hours."

The children had moved aside and were waiting patiently. There were five of them now.

"Where's Marochka, Seda Alexandrovna?"

"I don't know, children, I haven't seen her myself since breakfast."

She sat down beside Karo Leonovich, twirling in her fingers a flower of an unusually lovely shade of blue.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked. "And did you have breakfast? I left it all ready for you."

"You're early risers, aren't you! I thought I'd be the first to get up. What's this flower you're holding?"

"A forget-me-not. And you needn't tell me it's a herb of the borage family. I learned that in my botany class."

He laughed.

"It seems that even here I am not to be forgiven my knowledge, or, rather, my memory."

"No, it's called 'erudition,'" Seda Alexandrovna said bitingly.

But she changed the subject to smooth over her sharpness.

"According to the theory of Sekoyan, our research worker, there are flowers, such as lilies-of-the-valley, forget-me-nots, daisies, which excite everyone's imagination. Perhaps because we all have some memories of childhood and youth in which these flowers played a part. When we grew this large-petalled forget-me-not here, we called it 'Heart's Delight.'"

"That's rather quaint! And how do you classify those?" Karo Leonovich indicated the dahlias with a nod.

"'Joy to the Eye,'" laughed Seda Alexandrovna. "Which do you prefer?"

"Those gorgeous ones, I suppose. I have few memories, you know, pleasant ones especially. You know me, I haven't changed much. I

find it difficult to get on with people, or, rather," he corrected himself, "they find it difficult to get on with me. Though, of course, I do realize that, in the long run, the scorpion can't help being a scorpion any more than the rose can help being a rose. I find it easiest to get on with children. They understand me. You could see it for yourself last night, I think."

"Children are trusting," said Seda Alexandrovna thoughtfully.

"It's not that," he said waving off the hint of criticism her words contained. "At a certain time in one's life one begins to feel the need to watch and direct the development of the human character, to influence its formation, to give it shape. It's a kind of creative urge. You are fortunate you have a child."

The conversation was beginning to be awkward. Providentially, it was put to an end by the appearance of Seryozha. Greeting them with a nod and trying not to look at Karo Leonovich, Seryozha said, in a voice tinged with tragedy:

"Where's Marochka, Seda Alexandrovna?"

"I really don't know, Seryozha."

"She volunteered to take charge of the babies for a whole week, you see. And, of course, I took it into account when I planned our work.

I am to take the older ones on an excursion to the cheese factory today, and what am I to do with the babies?"

The babies were seated around a large bed of pansies. Their number had grown to fifteen.

"Where could she have gone to?"

"I believe I can shed some light on the matter," Karo Leonovich drawled. "You see, I overheard, quite unintentionally, a talk between two young persons. If I'm not mistaken, they were planning to go raspberry hunting. One of the young ladies was called Shushka."

"How very thoughtless of Marochka! She couldn't have forgotten about her promise, could she?" Seda Alexandrovna asked of Seryozha.

"Oh no!" Seryozha waved the suggestion away. "It was all arranged and agreed between us only last night."

"I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll let the children play in the toy house and give them our old herbarium and a collection of butterflies to keep them amused. And, as a last resort, we can put them to work sorting seeds. That way they can't do any real damage."

"I wouldn't be too sure," said Seryozha

gloomily. "But we can give them a strict warning."

"That's right! Give them a strict warning and take them to the toy house. As for Marochka, I'd give her a public reprimand at roll-call, if I were you."

Seryozha glanced mistrustfully at Seda Alexandrovna. A public reprimand was a serious business.

"She doesn't actually belong to our camp. She just offered to help."

"What's the difference? Marochka's a Pioneer!"

"That's so...."

Seryozha was hesitant. Cross though he was with Marochka he did not quite like Seda Alexandrovna's proposal.

"I'll talk to her myself," said Seda Alexandrovna firmly.

The babies missed Marochka. She was so good at telling fairy-tales; she staged shows with flowers playing the parts of the characters: the rose was Cinderella, the gladiolus—the Prince, the shaggy, russet dahlia—the cruel stepmother. But the toy house, a hut standing on the border of forest and park, held out a thrill of its own, chiefly because they were

rarely allowed inside. It was inhabited by a stuffed owl and an adder in a jar.

Having sent away the children, Seda Alexandrovna came back to the dahlia lane. Karo Leonovich was still sitting on the bench. A woman, her face burnt black by the sun, was weeding a flower bed near by.

"Vanui!" Seda Alexandrovna called to her. "Where's Shushik?"

Vanui beamed.

"She's gone off with Marochka to hunt for raspberries in the forest. Marochka said: 'I'll bring back a whole lot, and we'll make jam for Uncle Karo. Mummy will be pleased.' "

"But what's wrong with that?" Karo Leonovich asked. "What's there to get so excited about? The child has only neglected her social duties to please you, the person she loves best. I should think you could appreciate it."

"It's hard to argue with him because there's always a nasty little grain of truth in what he says," thought Seda Alexandrovna. She said:

"You can stay here if you like, I must go and look over the new plots."

He preferred to go with her, unmindful of her knitted brows and sudden silence.

Armo Sekoyan, who had just been chatting gaily with a girl student, fell silent the moment they walked into the hot-house, and turned his back to them.

At one of the new plots, where some men were felling trees, Karo Leonovich showed them a few advanced methods of hewing.

"Isn't my method better?" he asked them.

"It certainly must be," the wood-cutters replied, exchanging smiles, and they went back to work, hewing trees in their own way.

Grigory Yefremovich, chafing still, a neat folder in his hands, was waiting for Seda Alexandrovna where the park ended and the forest began.

"Thank you, Grigory Yefremovich," she said softly, signing the bill.

The book-keeper announced brusquely:

"About those children. I'm afraid the toy house bored them. They tore off the butterflies' wings, spilled a jar of glue and left."

"It could be worse," sighed Seda Alexandrovna. "And where are they now?"

"Their teacher came and took them off."

Grigory Yefremovich preferred not to mention that it was he who had run to camp to fetch the teacher.

"It's all Marochka's fault."

"Marochka's back. She's scratched her hand badly. They bandaged it for her."

Seda Alexandrovna voiced no anxiety.

"Comrade Korotkov wants the car to take him to the three o'clock train."

They were on the main lane when Seda Alexandrovna saw Marochka. The little girl came toward them, waving her basket. The snowy gauze bandage on her hand was startling in contrast to the disorder of her dress. Her dark plaits had come unwound and were tied carelessly with a twisted ribbon, and her print frock was creased and torn.

"She has certainly had plenty of time to change," thought Seda Alexandrovna. "It's all an exhibition: Look what I've gone through!"

Marochka went up to her mother and holding out the basket to her, said in a voice which was gayer than the occasion warranted:

"Mummy darling, look what large raspberries. Only I didn't find very many."

Seda Alexandrovna saw that the little girl was dissembling: she knew she was at fault and she had decided to face her mother in the presence of others, to get over the first, most difficult moment of explanation.

"We had no end of adventures!" Marochka went on with forced gaiety. "We thought there was a bear in the grove. . . ."

But her mother's eyes were stern, and the little girl's voice quavered and was still.

"Go make yourself tidy and wait for me."

When Marochka, wretched, crestfallen, with sagging shoulders, dragging her basket after her, had disappeared behind the pines, Karo Leonovich said weightily:

"Of course, I couldn't interfere. But I think you were wrong. If I had the right—"

Seda Alexandrovna turned suddenly, and laughed boldly into his face, her luminous eyes flashing. This was so unexpected that Grigory Yefremovich dropped his folder. She picked it up quickly, thrust it in his hands and hurried away.

Marochka was standing quite still by the wall in the porch and staring gloomily into space.

"Do you know that those children waited for you all day?" Seda Alexandrovna asked her coldly.

"Yes, I know," Marochka challenged, looking at her mother with narrowed eyes. "I spend enough time on them every day, but today I could not, that's all."

"Why not?"

"I had something more important to do."

"Like going to the forest for your own pleasure?"

"Not mine, but yours. Last night Uncle Karo was so sad when he said no one would invite him to tea with raspberry jam. And today we decided that you'd be very pleased if I got some berries."

"Well, it hasn't pleased me at all, and you made things very difficult for Seryozha."

"Seryozha's a prig!"

"What? What did you say? You bad girl!"

"Mummy, don't shout at me. Don't shout at me, please!" Marochka screamed at the top of her voice.

"What must I do? Where can I find the right words?" Seda Alexandrovna asked herself bitterly. "He, he would have found words, many words, pretty, florid words. . . ."

She pressed her daughter's head to her breast and said, trying to sound calm:

"What are you crying about? Let's talk things over together."

"Let's!" Marochka sobbed gratefully.

"Do you feel that you're right, absolutely right?"

Marochka was silent.

"No, tell me...," Seda Alexandrovna insisted. "Do you feel that you're right in your heart of hearts?"

"No," whispered Marochka.

"Well, then, tomorrow morning at flag hoist you'll stand up there in front of everyone and say so. And let them punish you as they see fit."

"O-o-oh!" Marochka moaned. "I can't ... Mummy, couldn't we think of something else? Like not letting me play volley-ball all summer?"

"No."

There was a silence.

Seda Alexandrovna waited. She saw now in Marochka all that she found so repellent in the father of her child: indifference to others, egoism, conceit.

"Did the babies look for me? Did they miss me?" Marochka suddenly asked, her voice hoarse with tears.

It was a family rule with them that once the punishment for a misdeed of Marochka's was decided upon, there would be no more bad feeling on either side.

"Oh you darling, vain little girl!" thought Seda Alexandrovna.

"They missed you terribly. They wandered all over the farm badgering everybody to tell them where their Marochka was."

"O-o-oh, the sweet darlings!" laughed the little girl, mollified.

"Sed-A-xandrovna-a-a-a!" someone was calling.

"That's Vanui," Marochka said.

Vanui's brown face looked in through the window.

"There's a man out there waiting to leave. Gevork wants to know whether he's to drive down for bread or take the man to the station."

Seda Alexandrovna glanced at her wristwatch.

"Gevork can go for the bread later! He'll have plenty of time. Tell him I'll be over right away."

"Mummy," said Marochka dreamily, "when Uncle Karo leaves, we'll give him a huge bouquet, shall we? As big as the one we gave that writer last year—just roses and gladioluses, shall we, Mummy darling?"

"That's how he'll remain in her memory—a brilliant, wonderful man," Seda Alexandrovna told herself dejectedly, as she paced the floor

of her little office which adjoined the administration rooms. "Some day she'll ask me why I deprived her of a father like him. What will I say to her? Nothing will seem convincing. One's childhood impressions are so vivid. She'll remember his sense of humour, the fireside story he told them.... I'm sure, now I come to think of it, he was no more a member of that delegation than he was a soldier or scientist. Wearing another's skin all his life. It's degrading to be his daughter!"

Korotkov came past the office windows, gripping a small valise. The girl students, who were seeing him off, carried a huge bouquet, the Gulikend farm's tribute to every visitor. Seryozha came prancing gaily after them.

"What have you done with your attendants?" Seda Alexandrovna called to him.

"Rest hour!" came the brief reply.

Seda Alexandrovna leaned on the windowsill.

"You're a correspondent of the Republican Pioneer paper, aren't you, Seryozha?" she said in casual tones. "It would be a good idea, I think, to write a short article about last night's talk. You could call it: 'Delegation Member Visits Pioneer Camp,' or some-

thing to that effect. What do you say?"

"I wanted to do that," Seryozha lied (he had not given it a thought). "But Comrade Sarkisyan has taken a dislike to me, I'm afraid."

"Nonsense! We'll persuade him. Come along!"

She was certain she would find Marochka hovering somewhere near Karo Leonovich. And she was right. They were sitting side by side on the green bench at the driveway to the farm, Marochka clutching his hand tightly.

From here a wide road ran straight into the forest. Korotkov stood holding the bouquet close to his breast. The girls crowded round him, jotting down his address in their memo-books.

Seda Alexandrovna sat down on the end of the bench, and Seryozha, plucking up courage, stated his business.

Karo Leonovich seemed to have forgotten his indignation of the day before and was in a placid and benevolent mood.

"Why not?" he said. "I'll write the article for your wall paper myself."

"It isn't the camp paper he means," Seda Alexandrovna explained, looking away, down

the road. "Seryozha is a correspondent for one of the papers of this republic."

Karo Leonovich paused for thought.

"It would not do," he finally brought out.

"Why not?" Seda Alexandrovna asked him quickly.

"Self-publicity. Not the thing. Oh, and a thousand other reasons."

Seda Alexandrovna was convinced now that he had never been in the Middle East.

"Self-publicity? Nonsense!"

"I'd rather not, anyway," Karo Leonovich drawled.

"You must!" Marochka pleaded. "You'll have your name in a real newspaper!"

"All I need are just a few facts, and your endorsement of the article." Seryozha explained.

"Material like this is not subject to publication...."

"Yes, it is," Seda Alexandrovna put in, determined to give him no chance of escape. "But then, perhaps, you never took that trip?"

Although she kept looking down the road, she sensed Marochka's sudden tenseness as the child silently prepared to hear his answer.

Karo Leonovich laughed, and at once the little girl, too, broke out in relieved laughter.

"So much the better if I'm mistaken," Seda Alexandrovna told herself. "So much the better."

"Did you take the trip?"

"What difference does it make to you?"

"Did you or did you not?"

Abruptly Karo Leonovich stopped laughing.

"Since you insist, let us say that no, I did not. Does that change anything?"

"Then you were not a member of the delegation?" Seryozha asked, nonplussed, closing his note-book.

"My young friend! Jules Verne never left his desk in all his life. But does that mean that you read his books with less interest?"

"And the little Turkish boy?" Marochka asked in a sinking voice, stretching out her hands impulsively as if to hold back and retain that tragic little figure which had taken such firm hold on her imagination.

"There was such a boy," Seda Alexandrovan said, miserable on Marochka's account as much as on her own. "Another man saw him and he told Karo Leonovich all about him."

Marochka looked dazedly at Karo Leonovich.

"But then how could you have been happy knowing we were asleep? You said that you'd been thinking about us!"

Seda Alexandrovna smiled a wretched little smile.

"That was another man, too," she said. "Another man had thought of you."

At that moment Gevork the chauffeur drove up in a grey Pobeda, decorated with flowers.

Grigory Yefremovich appeared. He, too, had come to see Korotkov off.

Korotkov, very much the man of business, pulled up the trunk top and pushed his valise in.

"Time to say good-bye!" Seda Alexandrovna said, breaking the silence that had settled over them

"Do you know what has just occurred to me?" said Karo Leonovich carelessly, getting to his feet. "Why shouldn't I go down in the same car?" He called to the driver:

"Wait for me a second, I'm coming with you, I'll just get my brief-case!"

Korotkov made a long face.

"You needn't write to me now, girls. I won't be there to receive your letters. I'll never sur-

vive the trip with my worthlessness brought home to me."

The girls shouted with laughter. Marochka, subdued and grave, stood beside her mother.

Karo Leonovich did not keep them waiting long. He hurried up with his handsome tan brief-case.

"Thanks for your hospitality," he said, bending over Seda Alexandrovna's hand.

With a nod to the old book-keeper, he climbed hastily into the car, without noticing Marochka's outstretched hand. The little brown hand, in mould of fingers and shape of nails a replica of his own, fluttered in the air a moment and then dropped. Seda Alexandrovna caught Marochka by the shoulders and held her close.

They stood watching the grey car drive off, raising clouds or dust behind it. After a while only the dust was visible. Then—nothing.

Seda Alexandrovna turned to meet Grigory Yefremovich's watchful gaze. His eyes searched her own.

Holding Marochka close to her she said steadily, unsmiling:

"It's better this way."

SON

At the Klara Zetkin Sewing Factory, International Woman's Day was always a memorable and joyous event.

The women came to work in their best dresses, bringing home-cooked dainties. During lunch hour the little tables in the canteen were put together. The men provided lemonade and sweets.

It was the same this year. Everyone had been in high spirits since morning. Everyone, but Noemi Varunts who felt that she would like to leave the shop and be by herself for a while. But she smiled and returned the greetings and went on working as usual, her greying, smoothly combed head bent over the sewing-machine. She knew how to keep her

emotions in check. She worked harder than ever today. The pile of sewing heaped on the little table beside her machine was fast dwindling. Just before lunch hour Noemi completed her daily quota.

As she went down the long corridor to the cutting shop, she was thinking that if there had been no war and everything had remained as it was, she would open the door and see Avetis standing by the table, his yard-stick in his hands. She clearly pictured her husband's large form and his face which had always brightened at sight of her. She seemed to hear him laughing in that spontaneous, boyish way of his, saying good-naturedly: "Today's your day. Make the most of it. Rule! It's your one chance in the year." She could see herself smiling back, knowing perfectly well that all the three hundred and sixty-five days in the year she, a quiet little woman, ruled over this big, handsome man.

Now this was all over. Bent over the small table where Avetis used to work was a thin man with colourless eyes. "Hands of gold and a tongue of venom!" his fellow workers said about him. But the man's smile

was friendly as he wished Noemi many happy returns of the day and congratulated her on the bonus that she as the best and oldest worker at the factory had been awarded. But Noemi's heart grew heavier still. She gathered up a new pile of sewing, buried her face in it and breathing in the smell of the woollen cloth, started back along the corridor. Noemi recalled how her son, putting on a newly bought jacket, had said, "It smells like your factory."

With the boy, too, all was not going as she had hoped. It was hard bringing up a child alone. Gabo was reserved and secretive by nature and lately she noticed that he was growing estranged from her. He had begun earning money and his teachers at the technical school were pleased with him, but a youth can easily go astray without a father's steadying hand and guidance.

Noemi's hands were going through all the familiar motions, but she had difficulty in keeping up an appearance of calm. It was nobody's concern but her own that today was her twentieth wedding anniversary, a day that she and her husband had always marked with an exchange of gifts and of gay jokes

whose meaning had only been clear to the two of them.

She did not want anyone to know anything about it.

But apparently there were those who knew.

When at lunch hour Noemi slipped quietly out of the canteen, old Anna kept the younger girls from running after her.

"Leave her to herself for a while," said Anna.

It was difficult to keep anything from people you had been working with side by side for twenty-two years!

The small garden with its huge nut-tree was all that remained of the factory to which Noemi, then a shy young girl, had first come. Noemi recalled how the engineer putting up the new buildings had wanted to cut down the tree, but had yielded to the factory women's pleas and left it standing. With the years the little garden had grown in size and beauty. The fountain, the flowers, the benches were all new. A flower bed had replaced the large flat rock which Avetis and she had often used as a lunch-table. And where the waste lot had been, the club and canteen now stood. Noemi had forgotten nothing. At

first, they had gone out in a group to clear the site of rocks and stones. It had been voluntary work, done after the regular working hours. Avetis had kept by her side all the time. He had thought that Noemi was lifting rocks too heavy for her. The loving care he had always taken of her! Then they had put up the foundation. It had been decided to let the factory's best workers lay the cornerstone. The others had pushed Avetis forward. He had balked at first, but then, grave of face, though inwardly excited, he had launched the work. She had joined him.

There was the building—pink tufa with a fretwork design. Avetis was dead, but the stone his hand had touched held up these walls. And her stone was beside his.

Noemi passed her hand slowly over her face. It had really been—the happiness of loving and being loved. There had been a family, warm, close knit. Although Noemi's whole life had passed between the factory and her home she had always felt that she was in the very thick of the great and crucial events that concerned all mankind. This feeling had deepened when Avetis had gone to the front. It had been in Noemi's heart all

the years she lived without him, and it had helped her retain her hold on life after his death. Why, then, today had she succumbed to this mood of sad reflection? "I must be getting old," she told herself.

She did not go home after work. Instead, she stayed in the shop where the girl apprentices worked in the evenings. Wearing her felt slippers, she walked noiselessly up and down the rows of sewing-machines, bending to examine the girls' work.

When they told her that her son was inquiring for her downstairs, Noemi had a moment of panic. Gabo rarely came to the factory, and besides he now attended night school. Noemi hurried down to the entrance. There was her son, a tall boy in the uniform of a trade-school pupil, awkwardly fingering his cap. Noemi, who held that parents must never show their feelings to their children, went calmly across to him.

"Has anything happened, Gabo? Have you had your dinner? You'll find the meat in the cupboard, in the blue pan."

Gabo's confusion did not escape the mother's penetrating glance.

"I've eaten. I was only wondering what made you late. Will you be home soon?"

His voice held a plea.

"I'll be here a little longer. Run along, Son. You can go to a movie tonight if you like."

To her surprise the boy declined. Noemi watched him as he moved away. Her life would hardly worth anything if she failed to make a good, a real man out of Gabo.

A noisy, chattering crowd of girls saw Noemi to the gate of her house. Each had something she longed to discuss with her, each wanted her undivided attention.

The lights were on in the house. "It means Gabo hasn't gone to bed yet," thought Noemi. But she was wrong. She found him lying on the sofa in his clothes, asleep.

"He was waiting for me," Noemi told herself, "and forgot to switch off the kettle." She hurried to the little side-table where the electric kettle was bubbling. As she pulled out the plug she noticed that the oil-cloth covering the side-table had been replaced by a lace cloth she had never seen before. Then her glance travelled over the freshly scrubbed floor and on to the table on which

stood a platter with cakes and a small dish of bonbons. A parcel, carefully tied with string, was lying beside her plate. On the white paper wrapping the word "Congratulations!" was printed in red pencil.

Noemi picked up the parcel. A length of bright blue silk patterned with large pink flowers slid heavily out of it. It was obviously just what a boy would admire.

The mother went up to Gabo. He slept, his cheek resting on an opened book. In the sweep of his shoulders, in his large hand which hung down over the sofa, in the lines of his brows and forehead Noemi saw again the beloved features of the man who was no more. She began to cry. The tears dropped on to the blue of the silk she was holding. And with every tear the bitterness that had wrung her heart all day ebbed. Pain receded, giving way to relief, to what was almost happiness, which shone out suddenly in the mother's tear-washed eyes.